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Where is the light?

Poems 1955 - 2005

by Oscar Mandel



Where is the light?

Corrections:

P.v, line 20: late poetry mingle freely, as in my 1981 volume [etc.]

GENIUS (p.11): lines 5-6 should be a single line

MORNING IN CHAMONIX (p.13): lines – 5-4 should be a single line.

ON THE BEACH (p.17): lines 2-3 should be a single line.

THE TIDES IN NORMANDY (p.18): lines – 5-4 should be a single line.

P.21, line 1: A fuss [etc.]

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Where is the light?

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by Oscar Mandel

*Keiner mag ihn hören, keiner sieht ihn an,
und die Hunde knurren um den alten Mann.
Und er lässt es gehen alles, wie es will,
Dreht, und seine Leier steht ihm nimmer still.*

Wilhelm Müller: Der Leiermann

Los Angeles : a Spectrum Productions Book

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Foreword

Some of the poems in this volume are printed here for the first time. Others have been published before—in periodicals, in one or both of my collections, *Simplicities* in 1974 and *Collected Lyrics and Epigrams* in 1981, or in a mix of these. The main justification for reprinting poems from earlier times is that most of them have been revised for their present appearance, sometimes significantly, sometimes by means of a dab or two. In a few instances, however, happening to like, in retrospect, both an earlier and a revised passage, or an entire poem in an earlier and later reading, I have printed both versions of the passage or poem, and thereby “allowed” the reader either to choose between them, or else, like myself, to accept them both. On the other hand, a few—more than a few, but fewer than many—of my previously published poems are now bluntly suppressed.

The organization of these poems into sections or chapters is loose, informal, and tolerant of other divisions. It is, in reality, an offer of pauses in the reading where an uninterrupted flow might prove daunting. Good poems should be read few by few (bad ones none by none, of course). Within these sections, early and late poetry mingles freely, as it did in my 1981 volume: “If early and late”, I wrote at the time in my foreword, “are made good neighbors in this book, so are—under each of the headings—contrary moods and notions, grave considerations and comic intuitions, free verse and traditional strategies, high song and plain speech, epigrammatic turns and warmer moments. And why not? A book of poems is not a philosophical tract.... I am perfectly content, therefore, to have each poem be, in Wallace Stevens’ wonderful phrase, the ‘cry of its occasion’.... Poems are not improved by being consistent with others.” As a result, the movement toward a terse, laconic and dry poetry which I am able to detect in my work from its early days to the present is masked by the topical arrangement I have chosen. To be sure, the chapter called “Roaming Eros” is something of an exception to this chronological porridge: all its poems are young.

Although, in writing poetry, I have always instinctively used “a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” (Wordsworth is speaking here) and avoided the private symbols, the brilliant hide-and-seek maneuvers, the myriad acrobatics of language, syntax and logic dear to our “difficult” poets—and all this, I say it again, by instinct, and not as a result of high theoretical thinking—“as I am, I write”—still, a few of my poems name names not necessarily familiar to every reader, or else make use of words in languages which, however close to our own, no law compels an English-speaking reader to know. Hence the notes, frugal and unostentatious enough, at the tail-end of this volume, together with the alternate readings already mentioned. Carried away, I also allowed myself the occasional personal remark in these notes. The reader is obviously free to ignore my jottings and stick to the naked texts.

My first published poem appeared in *The Georgia Review* in 1955 when I was twenty-nine years old, an indecently advanced age for a first bow to the public. My chief excuse is that I knew no English until the age of fourteen. Thereafter I needed, naturally, a stretch of time before I could feel at home in the new language. After I entered New York University—in 1943, at the age of seventeen—English was no longer a problem, and, fired by the poetry of England quite as I had been bewitched by Verlaine as a child before the war, I filled countless sheets of paper with ardent verse, all of which has disappeared as landfill. I can’t remember at what point I began to mail my poems to literary journals—perhaps a year or so after I became a pauper graduate assistant at Ohio State University in 1948, perhaps while working for the civil service in Philadelphia between 1951 and 1953. In any event, add to this count nearly two years in the army (1953-1955) and it makes sense, finally, that I was nearing thirty when the modest yet prophetic two stanzas of “Always Almost” were printed.

I have allowed fewer than one hundred fifty poems to survive the half a century of intermittent poetic perspiration that followed. Trying to cope with arrivals of books both thick and thin, and sinking ever deeper into masses of literature as the world grows older, readers will not be distressed, I think, to find that mine is a mere grain contributed to the pile.

What follows is a list of the periodicals and anthologies in which poems of mine have appeared over the years, though it bears repeating that most of these texts are now revised. The list is short. Nine times out of ten, my poems have been refused. They have also been turned away by any number of excellent, judicious publishing houses. All the warmer, therefore, is my gratitude to the editors who have given a few of my children a home.

The Georgia Review, Summer 1955 (1 poem).

Prairie Schooner, Winter 1955 (1 poem).

Epoch, Fall 1957 (1 poem).

Western Humanities Review, Winter 1958 (1 poem).

San Francisco Review, Spring, 1959 (1 poem)

Prairie Schooner, Spring 1959 (6 poems)..

Epoch, Spring 1960 (2 poems).

Northwest Review, Fall-Winter 1960 (12 poems).

Mutiny, Spring 1961 (3 poems).

The Hudson Review, Summer 1961 (5 poems).

The Literary Review, Summer 1962 (8 poems).

Southwest Review, Spring 1963 (1 poem).

College English, November 1963 (2 poems).

Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Death of John F. Kennedy, edited by E.A.Glikes and P. Schwaber, New York: Basic Books, 1964 (1 poem).

Arvon Foundation Poetry Competition: *1980 Anthology*, edited by Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, Kilnhurst: Kilnhurst Publishing Company, 1982 (1 poem).

New Directions 49: An International Anthology of Poetry and Prose, edited by J. Laughlin, New York: New Directions, 1985 (1 poem).

Prairie Schooner, Summer 1995 (3 poems).

The Antioch Review, Spring 2000 (1 poem).
Dalhousie Review, Summer 2002 (4 poems).
Eclipse, Fall 2002 (1 poem).

To conclude, let me mention the fact that I used one poem as “trigger” for each of the sixteen essays of my *Book of Elaborations*, published by New Directions in 1985.

TABLE

Note. A dot at the bottom or top of a page indicates the presence of a space between two lines, sections or stanzas.

Tell me, where is the light? 1

One: Places

An espresso at the 'Number Six' (London 1956)	5
The Fountain of Trevi	5
Breakfast and jukebox on Piazza Trasimeno (Rome 1960)	8
Cameras	8
Robbers	9
Morning at Chiavari (Liguria)	11
Two views	à
Genius (Lucerne)	11
Col du Grand Saint Bernard	12
Morning in Chamonix	12
Colonel Pluchot chats with madame Duchesne	14
A child at the seaside	16
On the beach	17
The tides in Normandy (Houlgate)	17
Dawn at the manor of Cerisy-la-Salle	20
One minute before noon	21
The radical visits La Baule	22
The clock in the Amsterdam flea market	23
From Chihuahua to the border	24
The deserted beach	25
Camp Gordon (Georgia 1953)	26
Rainy season in barracks (Camp Fuji 1954)	27
In a democracy	28
Empty house	28
One of the astronauts ate a piece of consecrated bread	
on the moon	29
Let us dream (I)	30
Let us dream (II)	30

Two: Roaming Eros

Fever	33
Falling	33
Plenitude	33
Young Pan hauls Methodists away	34
Song: Today April today	34
The twenty-sixth of April	36
Four hands whisper and do	36
A banker sobbing on his typist	37
Dumb to other blood	37
After Herrick	38
The garden	38
No more poems (I)	40
No more poems (II)	40
The romantic materialist	40
The jail	41
The journey	41
Lover's maxim	41
Unsafe I reply	41
Thwarted lover	43
Repine, repine	44
Wounded philosopher	44
Others are more important	45
The egg the Mother threw	45
Foul mood	45
Brute English	46
After Goethe	47
Sullen Myrmidons (1)	47
Sullen Myrmidons (2)	47

Three: Names, and one nameless

"The great lack of our time is that we have no commanding myth to which we can give allegiance"	51
Immortality	51
Empedocles	52

War ditty (1)	52
The life and death of Hannibal	53
To Ovid, from army barracks	53
Holy books	54
On re-reading the New Testament	54
The vision of Jesus of Nazareth concerning Johann Sebastian Bach	54
The atheist	55
A ditty sung by a choir of aging poets (among them Sophocles, Shakespeare and Goethe)	55
Iago	56
The soldier and Baudelaire	56
The conceptions of the intellect	57
War ditty (II)	57
Robert Frost: "I'd as soon make love in Lover's Lane as write for Little Magazines"	58
Meditation on Wallace Stevens' "The imperfect is our paradise"	58
Do not place your trust in babies	60
Robinson Jeffers: "Come peace or war, the progress of Europe and America becomes a long process of deterioration"	60
On the assassination of President Kennedy	61
Words for John Strachey's "On the Prevention of War"	62
How did Sam Beckett die?	63
"Late Frost" by Suzuhiko Kawasaki	64
Bad choices	65
The young man who is blind	66

Four: Poems with animals

Insect	71
A fly a fly and I	71
Motion	71
I am a little snail	72
After Li Po	72
Garden idyll	73
The ostrich	74

Crow	74
Slanted bird	75
Pigeon fly	75
When does why end?	76
Homeric simile	77
Three beasts	77
Impatience	78
A visit to the zoo	78

Five: Tenebrae

L'autobus à Paris (le 25 juin 2004)	81
After running five minutes	81
Open letter to God	82
The schoolyard	82
Old man in love	83
Bad days for poetry, in five movements	84
To Blaise Pascal	85
Me for soft floors	85
Esther Lily Sanchez (1944-1988)	86
Dejection	86
The tree	87
Marching song	88
Christmas	88
Miracle play	88
Forgive me	89
Berceuse	90
Memorial Day	90
My father: 1978	91

Six: Torpors and diminutions

Professor Oscar Mandel	95
Man is what animal?	95
The swimmer with the long cigar	96
The lodger in the floating room	96
The proofreader's lament	97
The dullard in the shipping department	98

On my 29 th birthday	99
Easter Sunday	99
The ecstasy of Brother Giles	100
If oh you wind	101
Boredom	101
Always almost	102
When it rains	102
Triplets	102

Seven: The poet

Poetry (foul mood)	107
Don't believe everything the poets tell you	107
Sir Toby Belch against Shakespeare	108
Bu Fu decides to study the Book of Pentagrams	109
A poet is received at the White House and apologizes to his fellow poets	109
Tom Fiddle in a heavenly mood	110
Poet's secret	111
Praise-me-praise-me!	111
Some, scared of failure	112
Neither Guibelline nor Guelf	112
Le Roi Soleil	113

Epilogue

It	115
Notes	117
Index to titles	125

Tell me, where is the light?
I'll after it
with gentle zeal
and modest adoration,
though it dangle off the ceiling
from a bulb
glowing dimly bright.

Better that than night.

One: Places

I have arranged the poems in this section without regard for subject matter, mood, form, or date of original composition; and although they were evoked or provoked by places, they do not necessarily intend to describe them. They begin with a cup of Italian coffee which I was happy to find in Chelsea in 1956 and terminate in a dream of anyhow indescribable paradise.

AN ESPRESSO AT THE 'NUMBER SIX'

(London 1956)

Disinherited but dignified,
alone to the right, the same to the left,
I sip my sweetened espresso
this tolerable night.

I'm thirty, and where is home?
One more year, one more roof and soul.
A man of many homes has none:
I call no spot of earth my own.

This sterling English I bagged like a thief,
dropping, as I ran, of Flanders,
Cracow, Vienna and France good coins:
sure I must come to grief.

Yet most were kind. Some offered me
a chair, few blamed the absence of a face.
What saved my happiness, in sum,
was middling courtesy.

Refreshed, I leave a middling tip and rise.
My home is any fragrant history.
When stones have failed, and beams are scarce,
a tent, Vitruvius, must suffice.

THE FOUNTAIN OF TREVI

"Enzo!"

"Fabrizio!"

"Cafone!"

A brat wades into the basin to retrieve the coins, sopping shoes,
pants and shirt, immemorial and clutchy.

Mothers and fathers and fathers and mothers are bawling out their slippery kids or wetting them with juicy-lipped kisses.

And now a fresh damp load of heated tourists. The cameras salute the statues.

Boys ogle ogled girls. Somebody is selling pictures of exactly what we're all looking at.

The Fiats and Lambrettas fart into the hubbub, the walls and shops of the piazza echo the smelly sputter, our lungs turn black.

Legs dangle as we sit tier on tier; my feet in their sandals ache like African troopers.

The bearded generation in undershirts and tatters glower or sleep artistically or munch a crust; the girls look as if their thoughts if any are fatal.

Suddenly a Midwesterner has offered a horse-and-buggy man three thousand, who insists like a spinning record on five, he doesn't work winters, the polyester wife is miserably embarrassed, they get off, I can't see who won, the bald head sweats with anger, the horse clobbers off.

A small policeman launches a monstrous quarrel with five men, they're having a grand time, like movie Italians, the kids are yelping to help the quarrel along.

The foreigners are gazing, wonderstruck, at the Fontana,

At the imperious god

The pointed finger

The Triton storming the steeds, the uprushing outrushing steeds, the imagined clamor of the conch,

Noble the cascade, the leaping stone noble.

Somebody is adding figures on a pad, the day's expenses, and picking his nose with the pencil's tiny eraser; his eyes bob from the figures to the Figures.

Close to the rim, a foliage of Japanese takes root for a minute in "a glory of the West"; their smiles rustle among the private syllables.

"Fabrizio, vieni quà, subito!"

Two shrivelled local old ladies have come out for the cool air, the horses are so deep in their viscera they will be found only at the hour of the supreme recapitulation, neighing in stone.

What to do, oh flesh, with the stone's reproof, "Be beautiful, you and you, behave with musical rigor, manifest even at lunch a palatine demeanor!"

What to do? My feet smell. But we are here, are we not, here, not over there, in the suburb, admiring the city dump.

And the water is clean, not even the kids throw peels and wrappers in it,

And maybe not simply because the little cop is there; who's afraid of him anyway? his quarrel swallows him up, you could walk away with Mister Neptune.

This congregation I call a beginning, the beginning that has been beginning since the beginning,

You marvels, you immortal impossible water and marble demand.

BREAKFAST AND JUKEBOX ON PIAZZA
TRASIMENO
(Rome 1960)

Carabinieri on this August morning
when it does me good to see the sun
in its blue dish — although you guard
(keeping an eye on pretty girls and for the rest
making a slouch of it) — although you guard
the Soviet Mission come to sell who knows
what toothsome derricks for Catania
(they hatch their commerce in the sweetest oleandered
loggiad vined and pined palazzo
walls have ever kept from thieves and me),
you will not, will you, keep my Adriana
and myself from dancing one long tango in the street,
to mark, if nothing else, the anniversary of now,
for it was now last year today, and then
last April it was now, and Caesar too
was now, for Caesar did not live in Caesar's past
nor can a clock however sluggish fall behind.

Soldiers! I swear we plot to throw no bomb!
The tango turns us to and fro. They stare at us
my lovely dear, they wonder as we fool about,
if, say, we caught a Russian head amid these pines,
might we not plant a kiss under its cap?
Are they to act in case of sudden bliss?

CAMERAS

In Piazza Questa or Quella licking my chocolate ice cream
I adorn once more the European tourist scene.

All around the snouts of cameras protrude
To swallow gothic saints, heroes in bronze, and squealing brood,

With adventitious me
Included accidentally.

That gives me pause! Say Muse, how many are the silver screens,
How many are the album-leaves where, since my teens,

I've done my bit as extra in the crowd
Behind the wives or domes the pictures were about?

In France, Japan, the States, Peru,
Maybe in very Timbuctoo!

I stand, I sit, I gape, I doze,
I eat a grape, I scratch my nose,

Ignored, to make this poem brief, by countless eyes
I can't, alas, advise

That he who slurps the ice cream in the rear is Oscar, me, the Only
One:
Among the geese an unregarded swan.

ROBBERS

In Naples a gang of experts
cracked our car in the glass eye
we were lunching standing up a block away
and they knew it
scooter off with our suitcase
leaving a dabble of blood.

The fat women were all over us
we were thumped and yanked with advice good advice
no one had seen a thing.
Now thinking of them standing that suitcase

on a dinky table and counting out my underwear
Adriana's pearls my nice plan for another farce
my blue blazer and the rest, I see these articles
looking around flabbergasted at being pawed
by queer foreigners obviously no friends of the family.

"Where's mom and dad?" cries our property
spitting mad and scared to death.

Lousy gangsters,
are they laughing their heads off round that table?
No, this is business, they're serious,
one of them has a date
to go dancing tonight, Mamma is waiting home
with dinner for the other two,
they're in a hurry
and laughing their heads off.

Listen, children, listen jacket, sweater old friend, suits, shoes,
pearls,
maybe there's hope: the blood! let's not forget
the good brown blood above the chrome
you couldn't see because you were inside the suitcase.

Hey hey! One of the bastards may be due (pray God)
for sensational convulsions witnessed by fainting nurses
maybe he'll die corroded blue and green
from hankering after my underwear.

Yes but where's the satisfaction
where's the bliss
if I don't see it blue and green
with my own two eyes
or read it on page seven under local news?

If they wind up in a Ferrari
I'm done with this damned galaxy.

MORNING AT CHIAVARI (Liguria)

A bugling churchbell wakes me,
Proclaiming seven at seven-o-three.
They do it better, if better be better,
In tidy Germany.

TWO VIEWS

1

Place a cottage
in these Dolomites.
In this abominable beauty
place, brother,
a brotherly light.

2

Thrust elbows, you ice,
between these cottages.
Push, colossals,
from too much brother
too much brother.

GENIUS (Lucerne)

Who has not seen it —
how the water that was strolling
Sunday-like along the river's boulevard,
never quite stopping (as one needn't, if slow)
to admire a tree, a gabled house, a Swiss and
indolent sheep,
eddy now and then for humor,

twirling a leaf or nudging a sandal that won't sink,
all the while warbling a gurgle nothing like
Schubert

yet endearing enough —
how, when banks narrow, it speeds to a crash,
races deep and muscled, the eye cannot follow it,
it whirls, kicks, heaves, swallows, spits
and so resembles genius and is wonderful.

Avoid it, friends.

COL DU GRAND SAINT BERNARD

Glaciers heels up heads down
drivel Rhône or slaver Pô.
From what icy imbeciles
these grandeurs flow!

MORNING IN CHAMONIX

Bread and butter, *un p'tit crème* at the counter,
handshakes for old customers coming in,
the small routine and nicety of gratitude
for my ten francs' worth of business,
then back to the *trottoir* again.

What luck!
Ahead of me steps a girl
born to high heels and brisk decisions.
Her long legs wear a film of hose or pants
(what do I poor bookworm know?) —
wonders of lascivious couture
up which I rise, wishing
Herrick-like I were the tendrils

and the flowers printed there.
Her thighs, praise God, curve just in time
to cup the softest peach of a *derrière*
which rounds again into a waist
two ardent hands could loop a hoop around
with fingers meeting,
drenched by the glissando
of her midnight operatic hair.

But as she turns a corner
and long eternity sets in between us
(I'll never, never see her face),
my eyes leap free into the air she left —

More luck!
There hulks and bulks Mont Blanc,
his arms around his hulky-bulky juniors,
and not a cloud this late September
to cap their skulls,
no care but sun and snow and snapshots,
gliders, eagles and *téléfériques*.
What ardors and what squeezings
went to make such altitudes!
Don't, old worthy lord and mighty tub,
don't go the way the last world empire went
when I return next year to look.

A noise of waking doors and rift of rising shutters
bring Commerce smiling into Chamonix.
Welcome, beaming shops!
Their baubles wink at me
like Antwerp's hookers grinning through their
windows.
My purse twitches for a trinket.
Paradise, I say,
will keep a corner warm for tinsel.

Nearby, the young green Arve slides under bridges,
all foam and adolescent vehemence,
to wed some aged portly river
in the humdrum plain below;
but there, up where too high my tourist's eye can't go,
such luck!
high in cold moss, down breathless rock
it sings itself forever into birth.

There's my hotel, sitting at the curb
like a prim brick governess,
and leashed to her my bulldog of a car,
fed last night, pumped up for Italy,
and all but barking, "Off, man, off, why wait?"

Why wait?
The conifers are humming
slope on slope
a windy need of me.

More into my lungs,
fortunes of morning air!
More, more before I go, and must,
into the hot mouth of the south.

COLONEL PLUCHOT CHATS WITH MADAME DUCHESNE

Strolling on the beach and perking up my tan
(Scene: the Plage Municipale in Cannes)

I come across — dear me — what *is* her name again? —
Good! just in time! — “Ah, madame Duchesne!” —

(They own the “Arts de Chine” bazar on rue Pasteur).
The lady rises briskly from her lounging chair —

“Colonel Pluchot! How *do* you do!”
We shake hands — her naked bosom in full view —

“I ran into *Madame* Pluchot at Rohr's last Saturday!”
Good God, a girl of twenty would be proud of that display.

I smile. “Your husband's on the road, madame?” “To be sure —
He lands today, poor dear, in Singapore” —

(The place, I take it, for the better grade
Of tourist fakes in plastic, ivory or jade).

“To the Alps again in August, sir?”
“We might — ” “Such luck! Alas, *we* cannot stir.”

“Enjoy the beach, madame, the hordes are coming soon!”
Two pink nuggets nuzzled each one on its moon....

Consider though: to veer my gaze above her bust
Would show embarrassing embarrassment, so gaze I must.

“Do you think, madame, the tale about our mayor's true?”
“I don't! Jesus Christ was slandered too.

Monsieur Mouillot has always been most kind to *us*,
So why — ” “Well, they do say — ” “Why all the fuss?”

And so we talk — a bit of this, a bit of that —
We own a spaniel, they a cat —

“Goodness! Two Rolls-Royces stolen from a sheik!”

“Eight are left, madame, the ‘Nice-Matin’ reported without tongue
in cheek.”

These pleasantries, I've found,
Do help to make the world go round.

Another handshake, and so ends this episode
Of no especial note.

Now, however, let your fancy lift and set
Our chit-chat fifty paces off, on the Croisette,

Or on the rue d'Antibes chez Rohr —
Same words, same bosom — fifty feet away, no more! —

The fancy tries, it yanks, it pulls, the scene won't go;
Madame Duchesne would die, yes die! before she'd show,

Smack on the street, without distress,
Her ruddy teats in undisguised undress.

Bizarre! Something is here, I do believe, philosophers could sift.
Me? An old retired soldier? I'll take a dip, cool off, and drift.

A CHILD AT THE SEASIDE

Her mother prods her
into a tiny frizzling wave.
She lunges, laughs, waddles back, cries, attacks again, babbles
at the spray.
The Mediterranean kittens with her shins and submits.
Centuries old, the mother, smiling, playing, prattling and
watching,
folds the child into the world.

Somewhere, the fates are teaching
a newborn ant how to carry a speck.

Lying in the sand, repeated and repeating,
I blink for the hundred forty millionth time.

ON THE BEACH

A moppet asks:
“How many sand is there in the whole wide
world?”
I answer:
“Fifty-seven dillion grillion killion.”

Because I do not care.
It’s only when I think of us and us and us:
Then I begin to sweat.
Back, child, back to sand.

THE TIDES IN NORMANDY (Houlgate)

For Janine and Claude Lasry

The sea, as if absconded to another planet,
leaving dabs of mementoes: zebra-ridges of sand
that tweak the arches of bare feet,
crunched shells streaked out like Milky Ways,
sleepy streamlets, pools and puddles
where, musing poems, back and forth I rhyme my
toes.

The beach, as if far on its way to England,
An endlessness of sand

making ferryboats and tunnels obsolete.
Overhead the dreadnought clouds
ship in on winds not even young Demosthenes
could have orated down
had he at Houlgate put its pebbles in his mouth.
Tents and beach-chairs
clap their fabric as if applauding their tormentor,
while the kites jig-jag faking indignation
or haul across the sand
bottoms of red-cheeked boys bleating with
happiness.

Unflapped (for wind is to Houlgate what roaring is
to lions)
other tots carve out their holes and build their
castles,
winsome clones of me when imp of seven, eight
I dabbled in the sands of cozy Flanders
(Flanders, where pious to the preaching wind
the poplars bend in unison toward the East),
and for a moment as I watch the children
and the thread to mother which they cannot see,
my own, my caring dear, returns, and waves me back
to her.

Unbuffeted, a school of horses, svelte, sedate
(I wish they could rejoice in their paraded dignity)
carry young jockeys straight across the rim,
their little bodies nodding, nodding as they ride.

Miles off (it seems) I gather human punctuations —
clam-diggers they are whose bellies and souls
harmonize
in adoration of nature:
"joindre l'utile à l'agréable", they might call it,
bent over shovels and buckets and picking up
between drafts of sublimity a juicy meal.

And who sits there? It's the recording angel:
a hatted, cloaked and scarved mass of a woman at an
easel

doing Boudin's work behind a wind-screen,
inspecting, but inspected: she sees a world,
I see the world she sees and her who sees it.
Fifty steps and I'd be sucked into her canvas;
instead it's I who throw my net and haul her in,
edible for this my poem.

No windscreen for me.
Impudent to the gale,
I fight with both my hands for my cap's loyalty.
Doff it to me! Doff it to me! whizzes the wind.
But I won't, and with gleeful tears in my eyes,
swallowing balloons of air,
and ramming onward,
I stagger to the street at last,

Where the wind gives up without a fight.
Like a pricked balloon
pop, the roaring brute has swooned.
Normalcy takes me aback:
the chingaling of a bicycle meeting a pedestrian,
the neighborly slam of a gate,
and, up the stairs,
three friendly voices and a table neatly set.

“Vous apportez le pain, Jocelyne?”

Knife aloft,
fine sauce of chat,
fork into gullet,
attentive, held, yet yawning,
I yearn toward my pillow.

Easing into sleep, I know that when I wake
a swollen sea, full of itself,
lounging on the doorsill of the seedy old casino,
will taunt me that I dreamed of sand.
It gone and nothing wet till England?
It? The bib Houlgate never takes off?
Fathoms deep, odd friend,
all a-gurgle, look for beach!
There crabs will testify the kites were in your head,
the castles sandy ghosts
arrived by chance from windy Flanders.
And walking out this afternoon
I'll find Madame Boudin squat on the "promenade"
(an asphalt strip Deauville would laugh at)
toiling at the sea into whose foam, bulk willing,
she could dip her brush —

those ardent waters which, like all perfections,
will not let another in.

DAWN AT THE MANOR OF CERISY-LA-SALLE

A cow's pensive baritone
accompanies my slow waking,
and of regardless birds the merry fife.
Near my bed (a baron's ease) the window
gestures toward summer and a doom of wasps;
they drone their testament in unison,
one by one they die, sunlit, upon the sill.

Attentive for the breakfast gong
a rugged hand will soon be swinging,
I loll to the parish church whose bell
the fickle ocean wind now swells,
and now heretically numbs.

a fuss of gravel underneath announces man,
paths primly raked, prudent hedges,
and pots that cinch their plants,
as if those heathen flowers peppering
the manor's meadows to the end of view
threatened jacobin disorders to the mind.

A whisper comes to me:
Here, now, just now,
all contraries are innocent...

Dreaming myself awake,
I yawn mild thoughts into my pillow.
My past becomes the muddy spaniel
shaking his hide out of a brook
as we strolled amused among the hedgerows.
And my future,
to sit in silence on a bench of stone
friendly to decades of scholars,
and watch, forgotten of my griefs,
a slow beatitude of cows munching Normandy away,
their tails beating time and, now and then,
like lazy constables,
thwacking a malicious fly.

ONE MINUTE BEFORE NOON

Two cows are galloping in Normandy.
God dozes. Humble flowers powder the grass.
A caterpillar millimetres on a stone.
The road, fondling a tractor in its lap,
Slips under a hill. A rooster soloes.
A wall loses a sliver. Nothing dies.

Noon noon, ding the churchbells, noon noon.

God's awake!

A wasp and I exchange an ugly look.

THE RADICAL VISITS LA BAULE

Let her enjoy her crème de menthe while she has it,
The rich old biddy
On the terrace at La Baule.

Varnished, niftied, poodled, girdled, jewelled —
Cripes it's like seeing
A tombstone crack a smile.

Make no mistake, her cops'll bite your head off
If they catch you tying your shoelace
Against her U.S. Cadillac.

When she was born and belched her first squawk
They underpaid five females to go
Goo goo goo and look like they meant it.

And when she buys a hanky she gets chauffeured to it
And a six-foot goon
Trundles it out for her.

Go on, drink up, but wait, we'll blast the opal off your finger,
We'll make you eat your Louis Fifteen,
You'll scrub latrines down on your knees,

And never mind who'll wear the bloody opal next.

THE CLOCK IN THE AMSTERDAM FLEA MARKET

(I'll call it he, may I?) He'd come on wicked times
and hadn't tried to set them right since ages long,
he couldn't tick, he'd lost his chimes,
the key was gone, and now they'd made him sit among
disgraceful skirts, cracked tables and a perishing rug —
so bad four Dutchmen grinned when I
(dumb tourist) asked to pick him up,
and "Will it work?" I risked, and "Yes I'll try."

He wasn't what the Spanish Court would offer Louis
nor made to be a bribe sent to a greedy Pope;
no dolphin on his pate, no Naiad on his knee,
no amethyst or silver Faith and Hope;
plain wood he stood, plain honest face,
Dutch homely square
and solid Calvinistic grace,
one flower carved into his chest with modest care
to show he'd lived with delft and lace
before his reprobation to a slum.

I gave my seven guilders, found somewhere a key,
affixed a vagrant pendulum,
turned nuts and screws, and set him free.
With feeble health and anxious grain he sat
and pressed a cushion in my car
to make and to survive the journey to my flat.
The city is not plush. A street gave us a jar,
then twenty more, with cobblestones and tramway rails
and turns to take and brakes to squeeze and stops to make.
They poked him into clucks and wails
and whirrs, a wooden ache,
a knocking rib, slim gongs
of fright and twangs of trouble,
in short, a hospital of wrongs.
But when at home I saw him upright in his rubble
and looking like a magistrate

whose air ascribes his belch to creaking furniture,
I swore, come landlord, wife or maid,
come blossom or come burr,
to hoist him up on any shelf I'd ever own,
dusted, wound and decently displayed.

I've kept my word. The years dropped in, went home.
The hours migrated chime by chime.
Sometimes I heard, but mostly not, his mild
trustworthy sign
the planks are rotting under me and like a wrinkled child
I must fall down, there is no hold.

He's grown a touch more grim of late;
his voice a pulpit's weight,
hard not to mind.
No matter. I prefer the sentence tolled
his way: ticking Death almost benign:
domesticated Fate.

FROM CHIHUAHUA TO THE BORDER

What they do out there, the mountains, is stand
stark useless; bleach (but why?) glued to the sun;
not one green hair grows on these rumps nor is heard
one woosh of a wing or grumble of a throat.
The road's a slap at them they don't know how to feel.
They wall me up (driving north) on either side
of one brown prostrate earth,
I give them blank for blank,
until oh God who was it winked at them?
You, you, behind my yawn, you femurs,
ribcage, mandibles, sworn friends to me, you
plotting with foreigners, assassins in my house!

No, we love you, sing the bones, drive on, drive on.

THE DESERTED BEACH

When my spare time began I stretched under the gulls
Morning till evening slightly beyond the murder of the waves
Where the beach was soft to sift and I thought little
Of little, dun, like flotsam, nowhere bloomed anything
With remotely a soul, and the sea before me caused and sang
Such indiscriminate verbs, at evening
Troubled I went home troubled to the husband and the wife
Under a lamp, words and we huddled together,
But there we are, space the round ghost utters his look.

When it rained over my holiday, the window
Did not leave the corner of my eye, the seaweed's solitude
In the rain besieged me, and I thought of the wasted noise
Of all that ocean looking for its ear, while the gray tree
Dodged, and lifted hands, and sidled, and could not parry
The father rain, yet grows indifferent to the whip.
I thought too the stuttering waves I almost deciphered,
And repeated the stinging sand yesterday under my feet.

And I returned in the sun from morning till evening
As my vacation continued, and the sand mistook me
For its people, as the sea met the seagull and the sky
Held the sun to his breast. The subtle sand-flies
Walked over my chest, finally I grew up wood, flies crawl
As meteors do, hush, oh now the sea struck up
Gull and me and wood, and I obtained in moral darkness
Egregious patience. At last I am less than a man.

I stayed to let the legged stars cross me like insects
And while the moon was cawing and the gulls rotated,
While my bones ebbed in the influence of clouds, I won,
Home I shall go like sand blown to the door immune.

CAMP GORDON (Georgia 1953)

In recollection of the time of the hot hospital
down in Georgia in the United States
with pneumonia caught inhaling murder
and drilling with the jolly men
God had blasphemed against the earth:
they paid him back the same.

First sick call
where they believed my fever
and authenticated the fainting I had done
with such dark paradise of soul that day
marching to the tom-tom of the head-hunter sun.

Second the trouble with the human item at the desk
who asked me "your religion, bud?"
to fill a certain blank in case of death
and shivering I said None, before God none,
none by God, goddamit none
until they found a bed for me in a ward
full of his youngsters, black and pink,
the ones He jettisoned all over earth:
they paid him back the same.

That was a sweet pneumonia
although my orders were I must survive.
I did not eat the pills,
I rubbed thermometers, I groaned,
but slowly I recovered, I began to hear
the seven radios of the ward:
Love howling to the plik-plik of guitars,
trombones bleating, drumbeats raging,
preachers, sellers, quizzers, chatters,
trumpets cymbals saxophones: a soup of noise
their God had slopped down on the earth:
they paid him back the same.

At night I went in slippers and pajamas
to a patch of something almost grass
behind a door I shut.
I walked criss-cross and in a circle,
hearing honest insects chirp,
and while I walked, I sang against my time
cantatas I invented from remembered scraps.
I sang like a demented naked man
the cops haul off the street
while all the damsels laugh to see his human skin,
then I returned to bed, the lights went out,
and no one knew
I had then overthrown our consecrated State,
the duly constituted government of man.
Now I slept, awaiting orders,
between a cussing private and a beery corporal
God has fumed against the earth:
they pay him back the same.

RAINY SEASON IN BARRACKS (Camp Fuji 1954)

On Sunday all the rain fell down.
We cursed. Then Fuji disappeared,
Although he stood so close, blue days
We soldiers mucked his gown.

The roofs were drumming, midnight fell at six,
The grass swam in a soup of mud.
We gargled air and used wet hands
To squeeze the water from our cheeks.

On Sunday Shunkwan smiled and gave a wink.
He said, "Suns too must sleep." One could not walk,

One could not pay nephews a call,
But one could think.

We cursed some more, next boredom made us ill,
But then we drank such Yankee gin
That fists began to jazz. And Shunkwan said,
“Each man improves according to his skill.”

IN A DEMOCRACY

housewife, brat, poet, welder, banker,
everybody has a Fate
a huge contraption of grief and bliss
protruding, insisting
on picky attention from professionals:
millions of Fates in tandem or criss-cross
each granted its decibels
in the boom-boom-boom of history.

O dust.

EMPTY HOUSE

In the middle of my house
a clock strikes one
(does it?)
to no one.

Vibrations lunge
(do they?)
at chairs and sleeping
bibelots.

Why does the world

bother to be
without me?

At two,
a shift in dust
proves a vibration
was, and must.

Or did dust shift
to rendez-vous
with my two eyes
at two?

Why does the world
bother to be
without me?

Stars fiddling
ten billion years,
and not even
a pair of ears?

ONE OF THE ASTRONAUTS ATE A PIECE OF CONSECRATED BREAD ON THE MOON (1969)

The Reverend blessed a loaf of bread,
Aldrin flew it to the moon,
To prove man is and shall remain
Half sage, two-thirds buffoon.

LET US DREAM (1)

Time lays out good times like beads upon a string,
A kiss, a touch of praise, a music, spring.
Paradise be simultaneous everything,
Eternity obviate remembering.

LET US DREAM (2)

If there is heaven it must be
simplicity
where nuns will secretively go
with heavy-hearted lads and girls;
they dance with puzzled chemists
and they kiss
the desperado atheists.

Where every cross becomes a parallel
timelessness may make us well,
and prove
profundity a spoof,
problems mistaken, and complication hell.



Two: Roaming Eros

All the poems in this chapter were written between 1948 and, at a guess, 1960, and written in consequence of a jumbled variety of occasions and moods. Many of them have undergone revisions since. The arrangement I have made, roughly from happy expectation and fulfillment to disappointed snarl (need poetry always be “nice”?) is therefore artificial — made to look as though a single story curved from beginning to end in the background of these lyrics.

FEVER

The man you choose to love
should disbelieve in rain
run mad on Mondays
tickle generals under the stubbled chin
and never die.

I myself am nearly come to this,
because you threw me, absent-mindedly,
one entire courteous word.

FALLING

Love is simple
inevitability.
Drop a pebble
down that tree.
If there's no choice
but earth for it,
that pebble's me.

PLENITUDE

I sing under my beard
a basso folderol of note.
The cat cancels no promenade,
I jostle neither sun nor mote.

I sing the crazy mood a leper has
come back new-fangled to the street.
The windows do not rattle
and parallels don't meet.

Suspicious by my door,
the reassured gendarme

returns his pistol to his belt,
reports the situation calm.

YOUNG PAN HAULS METHODISTS AWAY

It's sienna all the way,
It's lady-slippers, grass deliriums.
No bookish God is peeping
With a scimitar inside his fist
These hours droll with liberty.
So let's abuse a clover bed
And pull the wind about us
Like a coverlet. Oh splendid news!
One hundred horses drive the sun,
Young Pan hauls Methodists away,
And flights of nuns are caught
In zigzags of vociferous bees....

SONG

Today April today
the new grass jungles
and green birds play.

A high-strung
wind conceals
his sentimental lung,

grumbles
where a bud babies
and fumbles,

and terrifies
a newborn moth

with jests of ice,

while high
the sun on ladder clouds
repaints the sky.

This week April this week
Eros flies in,
smiling in Greek.

My young eye swarms
where ready girls
bare dangerous arms.

Before tongues dare,
decisions dart,
we flirt mid-air.

We have no name,
we never met,
but all the same

we prophecy
the kiss the quarrel
the promise the sigh,

and long "shall we?"
as flower bends
to flowering bee,

as moon slips out
her grasping
corpulent cloud,

and ocean lifts
his waves where she
soever drifts.

THE TWENTY-SIXTH OF APRIL

The twenty-sixth of April warm needles
Are reported in the air.
Our sun blooms elegant. In areas of noon
Young suicidal men who dwelled all winter
On a ragged incunabulum
Have come in danger of a dancing foot.
Consider, Liz! an inkling of the wind
Speeds all the leaflets to each others' arms,
A touch of Spring suasion
Puts the candles to their prayers
In the first-come chestnut tree,
Azaleas set themselves on fire,
And the cocked eye of the sun
Stirs every crocus from his pillow.
Oh Liz, why should two lovers shuffle
Who could, if they'd but half agree,
Ignite the scene perennially?

FOUR HANDS WHISPER AND DO

Elizabeth for long.
That is official
And in company:
A bow to the throng,
Handsome gentility.

Liz for short.
The sound's like the quip
Of a bee snatching
Honey for sport,
And buzzing her wing.

But *Lisa* is the time
Four hands whisper and do
In two bodies' nooks
Like children at their little crimes
When nobody looks.

A BANKER SOBBING ON HIS TYPIST

Say, what will I see, Elizabeth —
A pink-haired dogwood in December —
A banker sobbing on his typist
For the sin of being rich —
Spider with his rueful legs giving
Flies their liberty — hare calling
Her hunter — ribald saint — Buddha in a pet?
Or, love, continuance of love,
Decanted once with such a dipping
Of the heart, I thought I'd drunk of it,
Poor me, a minor immortality?

DUMB TO OTHER BLOOD

My love answers my love;
into lips lips sink
and one same milk,
each other, drink.

What are to us
chaos and flood?
Our love is dumb
to other blood.

The cannon's concussion
finds us asleep

like harvesters blithe
after the reap.

No broadcast tells the world
its chemistry is changed
or by two dots of love
republics rearranged.

Month buries our day,
year raises our stone;
the winds come rubbing,
rubbing us unknown.

AFTER HERRICK

swiftly the apple born
the apple praised
the apple rotten.

swiftly we two
we too
forgotten.

THE GARDEN

I place you in a garden
but a garden twenty times
as good as paradise,
with hordes of flowers
and grass rushed on in legions
where a toadstool would get lost
if a toadstool could be found
disgracing in my garden
twenty times

as good
as paradise.

And over it an orange sun
contracted for eleven in the morning
in incessant May,
a cloud or two
for humor and trees
trees making a great windy rush
to stay precisely where they are,
near you that is,
spying out of every green and rascal leaf.

And round about
I stick a wide and nasty wall
made of the foulest foul brown stone,
besides electric wires, spikes,
and here and there a hungry dog.
As I can't fly
I add a stingy gate
locked by a ton of steel
to which the only key sits in my pocket.
The gate is smart and understands
I am the king and janitor.

The rest? I'll eat my tongue.
When it is I come,
and how it is you greet me,
the weight and contour of our dialogues,
the kiss that interferes
with topics of importance,
the bodies in their moist entanglements,
you know, I know,
we spread no gospels —
although that daisy
standing by our keels its yellow eye wide open
that daisy I suspect

is learning dimly in its roots
there's more to Nature
than the bureaucrats of pollen
and the sniff of lowly snouts.

NO MORE POEMS (1)

While I wept Ah woe is me
I sobbed a bucket-full of poetry.
But now, unbarred her door,
Drop, dumb pen, drop to the floor.

NO MORE POEMS (2)

While I loved unwinningly
I told the public. Poetry!
Now, desiring nothing more,
I padlock pen and door.

THE ROMANTIC MATERIALIST

I gave my love long kisses thigh to thigh
December night, the solstice of our love,
ascending toward the Christmas of the seed
and feeding our poor universe with yet
another bone devoted to a bone.

For all we knew that love is fiber, tissue,
cell leaping with intelligence of cell,
we ranted "soul" we raved "enchantment":
two compounds ionized into rebellion;
and yet the rebel's cry, electrons too....

THE JAIL

Sentenced to
the universe of me
let lips, let arms debar
that worse jail, liberty.

You'd breathe
with a constricted chest
independent
on an Everest.

Since Adam
poor man went and sinned
kindly walls stand
to the cruel wind.

THE JOURNEY

For three days, good-bye,
and in that thimble of time
oceans of apprehension lie.

LOVER'S MAXIM

The wounds of love bleed boiling red.
Prudence, dear, is colored dead.

UNSAFE I REPLY

Lovers, like emperors
of crumbling Rome,
sway proudest and strongest
the first day of throne.

Their stride and their spring
are such as gave men
the mystic notion
of life without sin.

Limber with worship,
calm after lust,
they admire a crumb
and smile at dust.

What follows we know:
spies in the cellars,
rumors, queer remarks
of fortune-tellers,

an old, lyrical rose
left in a gully,
tantrums of fears,
and then the last folly,

not to depart,
but sullenly sit
clutching crowns and rings
that no longer fit.

To this, says divination,
we must come as well:
love is a nomad,
duration his hell.

He comes like a storm
uprooting the trees;
he goes like the hem
of a tattered breeze.

Unsafe I reply:
be lowly with me,

huddle in corners
beneath history,

and plot to continue
passionate fools
not worth the notice
of maxims and rules.

THWARTED LOVER

Some death fetches
like a brisk police
that collars innocents at drink
or lovers at their kiss.

But cowards run
to their own tomb
(a funeral of one
into her own cocoon).

As if they couldn't wait,
they dig a solid hole
and sneak under a cross
to smother their own soul.

You, girl, are one of such.
I pleaded break
your dolls and idols, burn
a city for our sake,

cross husband, mother, god,
fool inconvenient laws,
love passion and rank honesty
and loathe peculiarly remorse.

But you, not answering,
resigned me with a sigh,
like an incurable
unwilling not to die.

REPINE, REPINE

If it is ill to be an underground
And dry he-was, it is much worse to roam
By arctic cliffs where seals are shivering
And sunlight rarely interlopes, and know
You dance meantime inside the circle
Of heartwhole fat peonies. Death is not cruel
Since we're all lost; it's caste I hate: to be
The varlet while a princess plies her minuet.

WOUNDED PHILOSOPHER

They note that I am glum. They ask me why.
Crime is not crime. God is a lie.

The sun will burst. Earth is a sty.
Nor saved nor damned I die.

Are these not cause enough? They nod: "The man is deep."
Nitwits! My mistress left. I weep.

Explanatory note

Shall ontologic pain be more
Than, say, my thumb caught in the door?

OTHERS ARE MORE IMPORTANT

Let me wholly put my mind
To Caracalla's frightened Rome,
To Albigensians burning
Pimple, hair and toe,
To sick and starving, maimed and blind.

Humane lament will tell
My own, perhaps, to blush,
For though I sulk and bite my lip,
My grief lies not on earth's
Noteworthy parallel.

THE EGG THE MOTHER THREW

The egg the Mother threw
that sprouted the first man,
Egypt, Ur and Babylon,
has hatched (don't giggle) me and you,

to raise this bedtime doubt:
was all that fuss
to culminate in naked us,
are we what bibles sing about?

Go wash, and pin your hair,
and let us, while I knot my tie,
submit that in our Mother's eye
we are, like Christ and cabbage, there.

FOUL MOOD

The wise and the good will not fool me,
mine's the tough language of sense:
not *this* for books and dress

and *that* for muddy Tuesdays.

Yes, yes, I've heard of selfless love,
immortality, free choice, our duty,
and the unique consciousness of mankind;
who hasn't heard rave the wise and the good?

Come, woman, undress, your husband's away,
your children snore, time ticks and is gone.
Root your fingers in the soil I am.
I will leave you at the first noble word.

BRUTE ENGLISH

I am weary of the lyric grape
(nature, take me dumb)
of "mist lifting out of brown cattails",
of winds' "contorted strength", of "pink rice grains"
for stars, of "undinal vast belly"
of the sea, and all such annotations.
Nature, take me dumb:
the bees and leaves have been recited,
my own life must be run.

I am weary of the topic love
(woman, love me dumb)
of "willow eyelids", of "intense fragility",
twin breasts "cooing like doves under the eaves",
of thighs "like papal marble", of moans
for love's regrettable delinquencies.
Woman, love me dumb:
though eyes may be "deeper than roses",
brute English is my tongue.

AFTER GOETHE

Homunculus, child of the sea
where roguish molecules arub-arub make birth,
where Venus rose and Neptune broods,
Homunculus swam for the dry when he grew up;

Thought: "Loved the plankton, algae, clams, loved
the seals and loved the lurid Galatea last,"
and thought: "Upon the pebbles, shingles, flint,
Homunculus the chaste Homunculus shall fast."

Scandalized, a wave kicked him ashore
where Helen bathed; who blushed, but was not cold.
Homunculus forgot; he kissed her tit for tat,
he stayed the fool that heaven had foretold.

Ah Theseus, Jason, Menelaus, friends,
Venerically still the story ends.

SULLEN MYRMIDONS (1)

Sullen myrmidons poison the weeds
Lest an enemy survive.

In a ruin two lovers huddle.
A booted lout guffaws.

In his low brain one atom shifts.
We must love on.

SULLEN MYRMIDONS (2)

Sullen myrmidons poison the weeds
Lest an enemy survive.

In a ruin two lovers huddle.
A booted lout guffaws.

In his low brain no atom shifts.
We must love on.



Three: Names, and one nameless

Adopting the same procedure I followed in the first section of this book, I have allowed, in the present one, a mix of subject matters, moods, forms, and dates of original composition, and used instead as my ordering principle (with a single exception at the end) names of important personages, real or fictive, summoned in the roughly chronological sequence of their existence or creation.

“THE GREAT LACK OF OUR TIME IS THAT WE
HAVE NO COMMANDING MYTH TO WHICH WE
CAN GIVE ALLEGIANCE”

That Eve and Snake made brisk alliance
Was honest postlapsarian science.
Kindly do not label
The grand thing a fable.

Nor was it mythically meant
That Atlas' daughters wafted to the firmament,
Though in truth's late avatar
There's little stuff but helium in a star.

And Christ was fact, and so was Osiris.
Myth *was*, but never *is*.
Time was when gods were killed to foil starvation.
We have irrigation.

Are they too bleak, the bonds of nitrogen?
Our sons will sigh for time was when
An atom hung from every eave,
And men were happy, for they could believe.

IMMORTALITY

Who's Diphilus? His works are lost.
He was a poet time was when,
Won some prizes, made a dent
In Greece among the better men,

And got tossed out one time
Because he wrote a stupid comedy.
Ten scholars now remember him.
That too is immortality.

EMPEDOCLES

Empedocles stood on the crater's rim
And looked inside at boil and muck and din.

In his right hand (or left) he held a cup
Full of the best Falernian sold in a Sicilian pub.

Didn't drink but poured it slowly down instead
Into the crater's horrid heaving bed.

Not since the universe began (that's long ago)
Had wine met with the pitch it met below;

And yet, as wise Empedocles could see,
Nor pitch nor wine consulted Greek philosophy

To do at once — I don't know what, I wasn't there —
Whatever Nature's law expected of the pair.

Instead, our man kept diddling "Should I jump or not?"
And stood all day tying & untying that mental knot

Before he cried, "Infernal Powers! I come! Spread wide your
gates!"
Human is the stuff that hesitates.

WAR DITTY (1)

Alcaeus, Horace and Anacreon,
Good cowards all (though brave in song),
I too grew nervous, dropped my gun,
And voted medals for the strong.

I favored too the bubbling of a kiss
Above the tantrums of a bomb;

I did my duty to my private bliss,
Alcaeus, Horace and Anacreon.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF HANNIBAL

Oh Hannibal, I wish that I could ride an elephant,
and wipe my boot against an Alp.
I wish that I could suffer like a helmet
and eat sorbets while temples fall.

But you're the man, oh Hannibal, who plunges
out of camps of edelweiss. You toss
the matrons of Campania to your chocolate boys.
Moustache erect, you call for poison, and you quaff.

TO OVID, FROM ARMY BARRACKS

Rome drove you from the middle of a repartee
Far from the Forum and the late levées,
Beyond the unctuous slaves, the wicked plays,
To growl, they hoped, with Scythians of the gross black
sea.

There you continued laughably to pare your nails
(While your grim neighbors tore at meat with theirs);
You cited Virgil, kept some small parterres,
Slept early. Hags in the woods boiled skins and scales.
Clutching your mother past, you took your pen again,
And weeping toward Caesar on his hill,
The song was Rome, the art was Roman still:
The syllables kept order in their pain.

HOLY BOOKS

Christ is bad and Moses worse;
Montaigne fills my mental purse.

(Re the number three Big Cheese —
Bullets, bombs, and knives! I'll hold my peace).

ON RE-READING THE NEW TESTAMENT

How could grown-up men,
More gifted thousandfold than I,
Upon this hocus-pocus
Cathedrals edify?

No use, it seems, to think like me:
Hard, straight and pointed as a nail.
Give Milton his angels
Lest his iambs fail!

THE VISION OF JESUS OF NAZARETH CONCERNING JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Why do I carry this splintered wood upon my back,
Why do I suffer the little children to grin thornily,
Why do I grant my nakedness to be seen
Crucified under my willing Father
(Father I dread the hurt for all my soul's solidity),

And why am I who am the Son of Man
Dirtily dying by hammer and spike?
I am in canon with my future. I cry
But I dwell upon my echo. I drag the cross,
But far, far off, divine, the voices sing.

THE ATHEIST

My mind dwells perfectly on death's incommodation
and nothing safe. It scorns noble literature
and professional wisdom: that famous Roman
calm at his blather before they broke him on the rack....

The night I opened Hell and saw Ugolino set
his teeth into Ruggieri's hair, I turned my head away,
but slow enough I caught a muddy swinish grin,
and then the teeth hit bone and I was forced to look.

His hair bleeding (and Ugolino's upper lip
was pushed against the nose from biting) Ruggieri grinned,
Ruggieri said: "Yet I am I", and I crouched stunned.
There is no cruelty to match no God at all.

Me for the rectangular bed, bad earth
my blanket, bone and beneath ache,
not even wishing someone drilled a hole and thrust
a tube to periscope some sky to me.

Eternal blank, worse than any pain.

A DITTY SUNG BY A CHOIR OF AGING POETS (AMONG THEM SOPHOCLES, SHAKESPEARE AND GOETHE)

Young, cocksure and immune,
We sang fortissimo of ghastliness and doom.

Now though, nearing goose-pimpled our icy tomb,
Of happy endings we prefer to croon.

IAGO

Give him his due:
when Iago finished
his act,

he shut his mouth.
There was no chatter
in the man,

no urge
to start careers
after extinction.

THE SOLDIER AND BAUDELAIRE

Poor Charles he took his sins so seriously;
each time he bought a drink Man fell again;
he suffered himalayas; demons pinched him:
symbols oh yes, but still they smelled,

they had the good authentic gothic air
of meaning blood and dealing hell
and swatting men between a woman's breasts.
Maybe he'd kissed his chère maman too much,

poor Charles, but come, it must have been quite nice
to feel that Lucifer himself broke through
Voltaire to damn him in particular
for lapping at a Carribean slut;

it must have been a treat to know a God
you could shock half to death by showing him
where two of his raw daughters fooled against
the code, "Their ghastly cult unhinged the sun."

I envy you. I murdered women, children, men

last war by soaking them in flames,
the rest is weeping starved and sick,
and what I say is "yeah, too bad" and look about,

afraid I've overdone the fancy rhetoric.

THE CONCEPTIONS OF THE INTELLECT

Fool of a Freudian,
what if God has legislated
we shall light upon him (glory glory!)
through the bearded figure of a mortal dad?

Fool of a Christian
to believe it might be so.

Three o'clock: on the lake
the sun places a flock of suns,
which a smiling wind erases
at three o'clock and three.

WAR DITTY (2)

Wilfred Owen died in the World War
The darling of his rifle corps.

He volunteered, the way a great man ought,
And can't complain that he was shot.

I squinted, said I could not see;
The doctors scowled, got rid of me.

Unpatriotic to the core,
I plan to live to ninety-four.

ROBERT FROST: "I'D AS SOON MAKE LOVE IN
LOVER'S LANE AS WRITE FOR LITTLE
MAGAZINES"

If, dear sir, I hadn't saved my dollars in a roll
To pay a landlord's toll
For neatly swept suburban flat,
And if, distinguished sir, I didn't own a welcome mat
And two Kandinskys (copies to be sure),
A living-room with Danish furniture,
And bonbons for my honey in a silver dish,
A kitchen furthermore with a sweet niche
Where two can breakfast on Bavarian ware
(If it so happens two are there),
And had I not a confidential bed
With lissom sheets and quilted coverlet,
A rug for pretty naked feet,
A burner with ecstatic heat,
And drapes to baffle streetlights when they come
(The boors) to see is anybody home —
If, in short, I couldn't love my mistress
Respectably upon a mattress,
I'd do it (braving frost) cramped in Lover's Lane
Between the dashboard and the window-pane,

And there I might beget, surprise!
A hero fit, like you, for Paradise.

MEDITATION ON WALLACE STEVENS' "THE
IMPERFECT IS OUR PARADISE"

I too, undoubtedly, I too
I should have ventured to conceive this world
as turquoise, aware but softly
of the streak that marred its blue primordial.
Not marred, not so (I too, I should have said);
that darker but still blue distress

enriched the stone's peculiar price,
for blue naively blue, the lake
untampered by its island,
glib blue would make orfèvres yawn,
pensive, I too, I should have said.

But could this be? I came too late.
And yet I tried. My fingers held
that delicately irritated stone,
exquisite with sin, until
the symbol failed. "Am I," I heard
a child, a Jewess, whisper,
"the discord that beguiles the song?"

She was the flimsiest among the dead
and stinking innocently in a ditch.
A man had pushed that rod of his
between his legs between her legs.
Her skin slumped through her bones. She lay
in her own liquid filth licking
a piece of wood for succulence.
One morning she forgot her mother.
The winter froze two fingers off.
But milk and school song recollections
kept her tough: she trusted God.
At last her turn she reached the ditch,
she knelt, was shot, fell blood to blood,
another's elbow slapped across her neck.

I trembled safe across an ocean.
Behind the barbed roses of Connecticut
El Sereno boomed his "all is well".
I could not find, oh Stevens, syntax
for this child, no jewel adequate,
no shape of nature that would tally
or be wholesome (since with rock
or thorn or tiger, symbol-making man

can anodyne his grief). And ever
untranscended, pain stands by,
there is no exile into peace;
still on my lips that excrement
successors will digest to art
but I must suffer brute and fat,
clotting paradise out of my voice.

DO NOT PLACE YOUR TRUST IN BABIES

Do not place your trust in babies:
Himmler was one.
Remember he too took his first steps
on funny pudgy legs,
you should have seen him gurgle
and smile at the smiles he saw.
Ah what a happy family.

Next time you bend over a cradle
tuck a hatchet in your thoughts.

ROBINSON JEFFERS: "COME PEACE OR WAR, THE PROGRESS OF EUROPE AND AMERICA BECOMES A LONG PROCESS OF DETERIORATION."

What acreage has calamity
more than *I die*?
I died at maximum of Greece
before Protagoras disturbed its sky;
I died at England's best: Raleigh crossed the seas
but nothing was my destiny;
and in America's first dignity
and last, in spite of Jefferson's augustan eye,
I was obliged to die.

Let Europes and Americas abstractly rot.
Death occupies a smaller lot.

ON THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT KENNEDY

1

First came the special issues of the magazines
With loyal photographs: the old rich times, the rocking chair,
The wife who knew who Dali is, the muscular war,
The politics retouched and smiling, the happy hammer
Of his power, the idiocy of death (at fifty cents).

The president was dead, tears fell and incomes rose.
Wait, brothers, wait,
My grief has gone to market too.

2

The picture books cost more but they were meant to last,
They used the most caressing words, like strong ideals
And dedicated heart and faith in our democracy.
And those who sold the plaster statuettes (one dollar each),
Their right hand mourned, their left rang up the cash.

The president was dead, laments and incomes rose.
Wait, brothers, wait,
My grief has gone to market too.

3

Congressmen deplored into the cameras, the voters saw
Their simple, manly sorrow. Foreign crowns were caught
Bowing usefully toward the great man's grave.
All were shocked; what's more they truly were; alas

One could not keep one's honest sobs untelevised.

The president was dead, tears fell and reputations rose.
Wait, brothers, wait,
My grief has gone to market too.

4

Next came recordings, and his voice was heard again
To make flesh creep from shore to shore. A publisher
Withdrew a luckless exposé of sin; a sensitive biography
Recouped the loss. Three journalists retold the terror
Irreversible. We shuddered, covered up our eyes, and bought.

The president was dead, laments and incomes rose.
Wait, brothers, wait,
My grief has gone to market too.

5

When great men breathe their last, their expiration
Swells our sails. Films shall be turned, sermons released,
Memoirs composed and statues erected. Pure grief is silent,
And yet pure fibbing is too hard for us. Our right hand
Wipes a tear, our left jingles the coins.

The president is dead; my poem goes to press.
Grief, brothers, grief
Is my profit, yet all the same I grieve.

WORDS FOR JOHN STRACHEY'S "ON THE
PREVENTION OF WAR"

John Strachey was his simple name.
In Britain rose his middling fame.

He thought of war. His manly spirit shook.
To kill off war he wrote a book.

The H bomb would exterminate us all.
Therefore (he reasoned) let it never fall.

John Strachey hoped that realistic negotiation
Would avert unthinkable obliteration.

We shall (he wrote) survive, if we agree
To shape a Super-Power World Authority.

Already he detected "a new attitude of mind."
With this the book came out and the reviews were kind.

But then he died. John Strachey, looking forward, died.
No H-bomb struck him; just the old foul-minded scythe.

Consider, John, our grievous lot:
Mankind survives, but men do not.

HOW DID SAM BECKETT DIE?

How did Sam Beckett die?
Did he grin, or did he cry?

Done crooning all life long
How life's no better than a crock of dung,

Was he content to slither down the drain,
True to his pen and fame?

Or did he throw a tantrum, like the rest of us
Who seldom die without a fuss —

Bawling for another day, another hour,
Never mind, ah God, how caca sour?

Speak, scholars; I myself don't know. But I do find
Deep in my doggerel mind

That Art is often *here* when Life is *there*:
Apple the one, the other pear.

“LATE FROST” BY SUZUHIKO KAWASAKI

A girl who faces away,
A few loitering trees;
all stand alone
in the silver of snow.

The trees are nude and black.
Looking their way
has she guessed the old notion
that nowhere is home?

Notions stiff with age
stir when their masters call.
Snow shivers again, again
a child cries in a wood.

A girl, silver snow, four trees:
enigma warmer to me
than paint dropping from brush
to paint the mere noises of paint.

BAD CHOICES

Reed. Born 1917 died 1985. Henry Reed.
No need

To prick your memory: Reed author of "Naming of Parts".
Wonderful poem. Each line, remember? starts

With rifle drill, then runs into a flower —
Nature so lovely, Man (no big surprise) an evil power.

Anthologies anthologies succeed,
Each picking ditto ditto by Henry Reed.

Hand me — thank you — that new collection —
Here, look: "Naming of Parts" — again the editor's "matured
selection"!

The thing, you understand, is most deserving,
And yet to print nothing but this I find unnerving.

You'll say, maybe our poet was delighted
To find his "Parts" so often reinvited.

I, however, see him tearing out his thinning hair,
Eyeing one more new collection with a baleful glare —

That poem again? I hate the sight of it.
My other verse — what is it? Tell me! Spit?

He banks his royalties — why not?
But wishes all anthologizers shot.

Granted, I never knew the man. Perhaps you disagree.
But now let's talk about unhappy me,

Who's less, much less, than Henry Reed.
No need

To prod your memory.
You never saw a line of me.

I've plagued my keyboard all in vain;
No couplet, triplet or quatrain

Of mine's in any Book of Modern Verse.
That too, you will agree, is quite a curse.

I tear my thinning hair
(And that's no guess — I vouch for it — I'm there);

From every pore that's in my soul I bleed.
But bleed I more than Henry Reed?

Not so, I say. My "fate" (forgive the pompous word)
Strikes me as of lesser hurt.

The reason, my good friend — let me explain — is very —
"Stop! I'm smart. No explanation necessary."

THE YOUNG MAN WHO IS BLIND

The young man who is blind is smiling
While one reads the news to him.
He listens to the voice's voice,
Pretends an interest in the din.

And when one takes him for a walk,
The tramways kneel politely;
He smiles like canny Moses
Traversing the Red Sea.

The ice-cap melts, plutonium spills

And terrorists rap at my door.
He chats, he does not see
My blood washing the floor.

And all the peevish race sweats bread
Out of reluctant earth, but one
Comes feeding him, for which he smiles,
For he outwits the plan.

The wicked hate the wicked,
the kindlier hate the kind,
but he is evermore the lamb
in the lion's arms reclined.



Four: Poems with animals

Upon noticing that animals played a role in a fair number of my poems, I decided to devote a “chapter” to poems-with-animals, regardless (again) of their theme, form, tone, or period of composition. Indeed, some of them are very old, others quite fresh. The arrangement within the section takes the reader from the smallest of insects to a yawning tigress.

INSECT

The tiniest of wingless insects — a nervous atom —
aware of me bad giant, dashes for cover
under the Welcome mat on my kitchen floor.

Plenty of time to squash it: my big toe would do.
“Foul fleck, thou defilest my home!”

But I’m not of the killer breed.
The dot whisks under the mat: Safe! All clear!

Nothing is too small for pity.

A FLY A FLY AND I

one fly that flies
one fly that drops,
neither content
nor not.

I do not wish
I were a fly;
I want to hate it
when I die.

MOTION

A worm lifts up a somber eye
And sees how sweet it is to fly;
What gossips, raids, impressions, climates, fun!
He's heard of flies that tango in the sun.

The fly (you guess the tale) admires the worm,
Enjoying on his decent inch the firm
Tradition of a twig. His own head aches

With every sprint he undertakes.

Eagles beg of moles a fling at sod.
God himself is bored with being God.
Why else did Zeus go slumming as a swan?
Why did the Holy Ghost go fooling as a man?

Cobalt atoms shiver in the very stone,
And dissolution is the amusement of bone.

I AM A LITTLE SNAIL

I am a little snail
in the green grass I sail
sometimes I live sometimes I die
and in between I hear great mankind cry
we mankind must survive
how ghastly to deprive
the cosmos of mankind
although the reason I can't find
being a little snail
in the green grass I sail.

AFTER LI PO

In a gentle silent pond
A jade pavilion stands;
Close by its door, among the fronds,
A bridge bows to the land.

And in the chamber sit
Three friends who drink warm tea;
They chat, and now and then they twit,
They chuckle when they disagree.

And in the gentle pond
A fish jumps at a fly.
The fly must stomach the affront.
No choice, the thing must die.

So still, so polished is the pond!
The house and bridge peep upside down,
And upside down the friends so fond,
The figured cups, the silken gowns.

But right side up and nothing else
The fish jumps at the fly.
The story which this story tells
No roguish mirror turns awry.

GARDEN IDYLL

Little brown bird, so very brown,
No blue, no red, no yellow on your gown,

Furtive at your nibbling like a fellow caught
Stealing something that he should have bought,

Welcome to the morning crumbs I threw,
Though I didn't mean them, I confess, for you —

I meant them for those jays that swoop
With royal screeching and a gallant loop

And don't so much as see you while you push
Your trodden presence underneath a bush.

Of singing not a hint, of whistling not a trace;
Just now and then a tweet marks your disgrace.

You have, no doubt, a Latin name, but what's the point?
You're not the kind that Latin can anoint.

Nor would birdwatchers shiver in the ice of dawn
To train field-glasses at your prosy goings-on.

But eat, my lucky chum, grow fat: *you*'ll never know
How brown brown feels when others glow.

THE OSTRICH

Hail ostrich! Noteworthy bird! Head buried softly in the sand
While other creatures, eyes aloft and nerves a-twitter, spy the land

Where gangs of growlers circling close
Grimace their threats of unmedicinable blows.

These creatures take a stand. They'll live another two, three years
But live, I say, with bowels melted by indecent fears.

So cancel my appointment, Doctor Gass.
Let come whatever comes to pass.

CROW

To be sure you are as black as black is black.
So, soft to feel, are my lady's tresses.

You do not sing at all like an angel.
Deep Socrates harrumphed his lectures.

You are, I understand, carnivorous.
So very much am I.

Peasants called you bad luck and murdered you.
Poor beast! *My* bad luck near kills me.

Certain poets do not care for you.
I do not care for certain poets.

Come, you and your colleagues, land in my garden
Any time for a bicker and a yarn!

I like smart company.

SLANTED BIRD

The unleaved branches of the tree in March
radiate, inverted parasol,
serious and quasi analytical.

That's when Nature plays the clown,
flies in and daubs a slanted bird
across a twig,

tousles the organization:
a whistle in a church,
a comma at the clause's end,

PIGEON FLY

What I hold in my hand here
is a pigeon, my friends, although
if it were whiter I should call it
dove, which is more promising.

I am hardly Noah as I lean
holding my pigeon at the window,
but since it's Spring and trees wake up
and flap their leaves: pigeon, fly!

It does not fly as elegantly
as in pictures I have seen;
still, it bears that little paper tube
tied round its ankle for my heirs.

How curious it will be, the day
one opens it and reads my hand.
“What made him send that stupid bird?”
“I had no other, friend. Be kind.”

WHEN DOES WHY END?

When does why end?
Never.

Why is this?
Because of so.

Why is so?
Because of thus.

Why is thus?
Because of that.

Boundless mouse,
Unending cat.

HOMERIC SIMILE

Like a dog and his master:
both burly but of course the master burlier
still the dog tugs at the leash
the backward way he wants to go
where a bunch of mutts and pups are frolicking
and he wants to fool around with them
or bite their ears off
or pop a little sex
or just smell them under the tail
but the master is yanking oh yanking hard
and of course the master wins
but the dog has to be dragged
wrenched head bruised neck yelping
paws trenching four streaks in the gravel:
So mankind (you fill in the rest).

THREE BEASTS

Lying on their flanks in our sweet garden —
hugging each other — two putrid rats —
“partners in life, united in death”
after they swallowed my green poison,
and already the flies, worms and other midget hyenas
are at work making omelets of them.

Somebody has to lift them into the bin.
I try with a shovel. No good. Damn damn.
They keep slithering off pell-mell.
I shove and dig and almost puke
knowing I'll have to use my hands.
It's their small revenge. Hate answers hate.

IMPATIENCE

Slow oxen hours, witless muddy animals,
I sit astride you
Shoving you with my buttocks,
I shout at you with the sweat in my face or
Beg you and beg you to move with my best furious cajoleries
And then again give you a knock with my fist between your ears,
But nothing.
You take your insolent time, of course.
I have to rejoice
You lift those paws of yours at all
And now and then we leave a tree behind.

A VISIT TO THE ZOO

I'll never see a camel in his orange desert,
Nor a parrot in a proper Amazon.
This tigress knows it. I'm not worth her snarl.
I deserve that hugely unmomentous yawn.



Five: Tenebrae

Many of these old age and extinction poems — gloomy though not, I hope, lifeless — were written long before senescence set in. The young often feel old; the old seldom feel young.

L'AUTOBUS À PARIS

(1e 25 juin 2004)

Tiens! Je suis un vieux bonhomme —
un vieillard, quoi !
Ça m'est arrivé d'un seul coup, sans préavis.

C'est pas vrai ? Je me trompe ?

Je te jure que je n'ai rien vu arriver.
Je regardais ailleurs.

Une femme, en plus pas très jeune,
m'offre son siège dans le 63.
Je crois rêver. Non, c'est bien moi qu'elle vise !

Tu veux savoir ce que je fais ?

Je fabrique un sourire qui me rend malade,
je m'assieds, je lui dis merci.

Salope, va !

AFTER RUNNING FIVE MINUTES

After running five minutes
I lie on the grass and listen to my heart.

Sometimes I feel like calling down
The well of my body
“Organs, organs! Do you hear me? Discipline!”

Lord, to be dependent on a pancreas!

If it turns off I'm dead.
Do I choose to die? Not much!
Yet this fat machinery dares run me.

Salivating with indignation
I demand to be pure spirit,
I want to boss these lungs, these kidneys, this tripe.

Did you, Plato, yes or no call them slaves?
Then why does that heart keep thumping
When I shout “At ease”?

OPEN LETTER TO GOD

Sir, I’ve been looking up statistics.
Each 8 seconds a baby’s born, each 20
1 wretch gets removed. Tick tock it goes.
I find, considering this exercise
In conclusionless logistics,

The come-and-go is useless. For, you see,
Life nicely wins, but death never loses.
Since we (next point) are quite as good
As Babylon or Komwatmay, stop birth, stop death,
Stick with us: it’s good sense, it’s even charity.

I add, being old, I think each day better
Of your creation, and shall be glad
To settle for good on your ground floor.

Thank you, Sir, for your attention to this letter.

THE SCHOOLYARD

Children at play
behind the school:
recess — explosion —

merry misrule.

I watch them hard
my side of the fence.
I study the faces.
They make no sense.

Thirty years ago
I saw, I swear,
the self-same children
exulting there.

My hand on the fence
is pitted and pursed.
Why were they spared?
Why was I cursed?

OLD MAN IN LOVE

Never envy the young.
They are rivers
that cannot flow without flooding,
they are magnates
who give to wrong charities,
and they fall with lamentable wounds
over a straw in an alley.

We are different.
We are as different as the hunter
with a last bullet,
and the ice of his great hunger.

BAD DAYS FOR POETRY, IN FIVE MOVEMENTS

(1)

Like an old man who places
one foot before the other and worries
before he brings his other forward
before the first. So much for victory.
As for enthusiasms with regard to skies,
Fra Angelico, the touching bosoms of Saint-Tropez,
he hates three mammas who occupy his bench.

(2)

Time was, I launched asseverations.
I never thought but I encompassed.
I cried, five times a day: Oh!

(3)

The rhythms wobble and the words have quit.
My poetry must be desiring it.

(4)

The rhythms wobble and the words have quit.
My poetry must be remembering it.

(5)

Harder, my boy, harder the speech,
stiffer the thought that ought to bend,
emotions thicken into bone,
the rhetoric is bleached.

My poems stick like oil or glue.
To me my cough sounds louder

than the crashing of the galaxies,
than Apollo diddling on his lyre.

TO BLAISE PASCAL

Clever I have made a circle
and inside I stir my tea, ambition,
ladies, bank accounts and poetry,
and sophomoric erudition.

I keep as busy with my clutter
as a baby with his blocks,
I keep as busy as a sniffing
yapping hunting dog.

Keep busy is the rule of men
too shrewd to be too wise.
There is no horror in the air
until we realize.

ME FOR SOFT FLOORS

Me for soft floors and smartly not to think.
Vase at the window, carpet, couch, unopened books.
A lamppost on the asphalt, peeping through a tree,
Gives me a yellow, measurable wink.

I fear the moon, and fear the beauty and the stars.
Me keep me far from distance. They utter
My how dim I am how dumb I talk,
They light me naked up this mammal farce.

How can those nitwit lovers bear the sky?
Me for a chandelier hung not too high.

ESTHER LILY SANCHEZ
(1948-1988)

At times when I should tremble —

house too dark — thievish scratch at the window —
reek of flames on the staircase —
pangs in my obscure gut —
my plane that drops through a slit in the sky —

at times when I should tremble,

I think of the best among us in their buxom years
and insulted loveliness,
raped by their own witless cells,
I think of them opened with kind knives,
poisoned with remedies
and oozing humiliating liquids,
I think of them alone in the terrible nights
when they stare into their future's hole,
I see doctors tearful at their bedsides,
fathers and mothers cursing God and lighting candles,
I see them dried out, ashamed to live,
done and begone all that's left to crave.

And one such in especial, one, one such,
who rises from her coffin in my brain
to say, smiling, as once, at my graying hair,
“I'll care for you when you are old”.

Time was I trembled.

No more.

DEJECTION

A fishing-boat that was a boat

lists on the beach, slapped by wave or gale
across the hull till it groans and creaks.
Another plank drops in the sand;
one more nail or stud; some nameless
twist of cord. The sigh this adds
into the sum of things no man
no woman and no child appears
to name, name with a sigh. Seaweed
hears nothing, rock and shell are deaf.
An insect tunnels through his bit
of place. The moon appears. Or not.

THE TREE

Somewhere I don't know where,
what kind, maybe in Minnesota,
there is a tree; "Good morning, dear,"
I say, "will it be really you,
you who sift the wind this province here
and whistle at your birds all's well?"
"Yes me; and is it really you,
with just two arms and still alive,
you with lips, you with eyes and legs
and whistling down to death oh well?"

There we met, we two, with great fine talk
of chance and how the atoms meet
with so much reason and no rhyme,
and how, though strangers now, we must
be staying longer in each other's arms
than me with Joan or he with jay.

And then I went my whistling way
Waiting waiting for the day.

MARCHING SONG

The dapper days are over,
The dying must begin.
I was a crooked lover
 (nice song and mandolin)
but, customer of clover,
 I've reached the classic inn:
wooden mattress, wooden cover
 on a rotten skin.
If only I could savor
 one last girl's first sin!
Then damn and die the rover:
 Eternity, you win.

CHRISTMAS

I hear the ancient churchbells walk
 and sow into the night
their charming seed, the God,
 his courtesy, his might.

I hear them sing again, again,
 In dulci iubilo!
May only we who slaughtered him
 his black departure know.

MIRACLE PLAY

Doctor
I'll speak straight out (you are a man).
We'll pamper you two months or three,
But then — that nugget on your brain —
 Yes, yes, it is a tragedy.

Patient

I have a wife, I have a child,
I have a car, I have a lease,
I have a yard, I have a job,
Can you not save me please?

Angels that night

Our wings will tell you who we are,
Our wands will tell you what we can:
We are the sprites that gratify
The last desire of dying man.

Patient

Then kill my wife, then kill my child,
So I won't miss it, kill the world.
How dare these bodies play when oh,
Under the mud my bones lie curled?

Angels

We promise you, there is no world:
That beauty which you see, you made,
And those that play, we swear, shall be
Eternally by you unplayed.

God

For each man's death kills all the world,
And each man takes the world to bed.
I am the kindest God of all,
The clay I kill does not regret.

FORGIVE ME

Forgive me, you so pitifully dead,
when at the trombone's bleat I dance,
as I forgive, reluctant, in advance,
the whoopers on my grave and huggers in my bed.

BERCEUSE

The prisoner falls down a ditch
and clutching at his pain he sighs
"I'll stop a bit." A soldier shoots,
the prisoner tips over, dies.

The soldier jumps into a hole,
an airplane sees him where he lies.
The bullets make a dotty line,
the soldier bleeds a pint and dies.

Home goes the pilot up the wind,
alas a shell bursts as he flies.
He thinks of mother, wife and child,
dives into the ground and dies.

Beside his head a daisy stands,
the night spreads out its stars;
a blade of weed leaps round her stem,
the daisy chokes, death is no farce.

I rise and strut and din at God,
"Pity! Comfort! Bring release!"
God says, "Your claim is old," and winks,
and tells the stars, "Continue, please."

MEMORIAL DAY

When you bring flowers to my grave
it won't occur to you, needless to say,
how degrading it is to be dead —
forced to accept "a loving tribute"
from my betters, you, mournful, erect.
You'll think, no doubt, "how grateful he would be
if he could speak," and God I retch

thinking of me down there mouth shut and mousy
meek
six feet under a stupid violet.

MY FATHER: 1978

Anxious to blame, I lift the past.
Let there be worms under the stone.

Like:

When I cried with exhaustion
you slapped me for crying.

Or:

I wished to be a poet. You,
predictable merchant, fumed.

Or:

When they put me in uniform,
you said: It will make a man of you.

Or:

You blustered at the maids
but snivelled at the sight of any badge.

Or:

The week before you died
you took a fling at bankruptcy
hoping to defraud your creditors
six of whom were bosom friends.

Anxious to blame, I lift the past.
There are no worms under the stone.
I can't hate down my grief. It grows.
 Father!
Is it like you to hurt your child?



Six: Torpors and diminutions

Here are the allowed survivors of far too many poems I have written on the topics of boredom, apathy, and self-abasement — perfectly valid topics for literature in general and poetry in particular — but — beware of a literature of boredom that bores the reader! *That* move is fatal.

PROFESSOR OSCAR MANDEL

I cannot build the house in which I thrive,
I cannot make the clever car I drive,

I haven't half a wretched clue
How genius makes a bridge, a spoon, a shoe.

Merrily I jet to Paris
As stupid to its craft as any sack it carries.

Relaxed with cuddly wife and friends
I tweak the TV set, my science ends.

Like any monkey I can tweak and flick
And squeeze and press and twirl and click.

Things happen so a god would gape.
But why? But how? Go ask an ape.

Yet imbecile and talented I go,
Familiar, chipper, treading on your toe,

Blinking through the glasses I can't grind,
And glad to speak my parasitic mind.

MAN IS WHAT ANIMAL?

Chapter One

Man is the animal that laughs.

Chapter Two

Man is the only species warring on itself.

Chapter Three

Man is the animal that prays.

Chapter Four

Man is the cosmos become conscious of itself.

Chapter Five

Have you seen how endlessly and mellow
A cat lies on his pillow?

What have you done with us, my Lord?
Man is the animal that's bored.

THE SWIMMER WITH THE LONG CIGAR

There was a man who jumped because he felt like it into the sea off Florida (near Vero Beach) to swim he said to Tanezrouft. They told him, those who knew, the place he named was far too far and anyhow far in a continent far from the shore and never had a drop of water dropped on Tanezrouft, but "is that so?" said he and jumped into the sea, guitar slung round his back and puffing at an eight inch long cigar. Reporters say they saw him last doing the crawl between Bou Djebeha and Abelbodh, chipper as a trout for all the sand, "having furthermore acquired the native patter and a rose-lipped slave to cool him with her fan."

Well! I too can swim! Teach me the rest, dear man.

THE LODGER IN THE FLOATING ROOM

I am not in the export and import line,
nor in the professions; I am not

a computer engineer; and I am not
the man who lubricates your car.
I live in a small apartment
on the twenty-seventh floor except
there are no stories underneath at all.
I am quite detached if you will allow
the pun and I do very little aside
from catching rain if it rains
with a butterfly net I stick out of my window;
even the helicopters can't come
very near because of the blades, and so
I will have to starve when the groceries
run out but all things considered
I am not in the export and import line,
nor in the professions; I am not
a computer engineer; and I am not
the man who lubricates your car.

THE PROOFREADER'S LAMENT

"Typewriters are amazing enemies
To lions and the crickets in a chirping head"—
These were the words young Jason said
When he hankered for a golden fleece

And dropped a dungeon overboard.
And Byron was a gaudy heart, a rogue; in fine,
A baron with a nose for the sublime,
His day a fracas, and his night a sport.

Moreover, loonies there have been
Who climbed five flights into a leaking room
And therefore wove upon a loom

A sun, a zinnia, and a tangerine.

(A pencil on my thumb, I earn my keep,
Don't catch the moon, and look before I weep.)

THE DULLARD IN THE SHIPPING DEPARTMENT

The world is a shimmer of color.
Consult in the woods a single leaf,
Beginning buff. It dyes in the green
Of a light, adolescent year, and then
Flashes October candle. When following
Death tans it, death is a color too.
And January is a simple moral month,
The upper branch is white, the lower black,
And black is like white frowning. But sinning,
The margin on the birch, is a color too.
Trick me in blue, in orange pink, in fury,
Golliardice, or gold, in mauve, in freedom!
Persia is a wine, Congo carves the night
Into a shocking queen, the world flings out
Weird oils on walls with its third hand
And rules a drumming carnival. All wear masks
And mingle in Harlequin motleys,
All sup in orange fires and marry
A blood-red and precipitous Moon.

But I am an expert in cardboard boxes
And transatlantic freight conditions.
My life will wear out like a rind of bread,
Remembering a violated church
In which a Medici of too much dagger died,
And lay slap-dash across the floor.
Time was, such rascals had their crimson day.

ON MY 29th BIRTHDAY

Let's confer upon my elegy.
I'm twenty-nine, ah me, ah me.

Twenty-eight dear corpses, come near, come near.
I bring bad news for me to hear.

The price of glee is going up; please for a plan;
How shall I earn my chance to buy a little fun?

Twenty-seven, did you raise your metacarp?
Bone to bone, speak free, my friend, and sharp.

"You are a bore." But is that all? "No. Go hoard
Each dime of luck that you can swindle or extort,

Save, be humble, watch your health, and fast.
At ninety-two you'll be the laugher who laughed last."

I'll be the laugher who laughed least.
"Then shoot yourself. Some fools are never pleased."

EASTER SUNDAY

In the tedium of my room all bulbs are lit
and stunned I attend to the walls
and sit.

I am mild as a sofa,
still as a vase, rooted in carpets.
Christ blew the shofar
and I saw tonight the first green pimples
on a shivering tree

and I came home shocked to be seen
in company with life.

I am bored. I have had three experiences.
I want want. I am the antonym of knife.

Shall I learn gardening? Humus
under my fingernails might be amusing; I have heard
of snapdragons. Juvenes dum sumus.
At the outburst of the Resurrection
a man must cross naked into the light
and sing hosanna in a vertical direction.
I am not morally fit to die.
I must as yet enact
what muscles imply.

THE ECSTASY OF BROTHER GILES

And Saint Bonaventure replied very earnestly
With his usual authority:
“Yes, the foolish old woman
Is able to love God more dearly
Than the doctor, and is indeed in some sense
The very heart of our theology.”

Then Brother Giles ran into the garden
And then to the gate, past three
Holy admirable birds and the blessed grass,
Shouting and laughing many times between,
“Dumb silly peasant fool ho hey come here,
She loves God better than our Bonaventure!”

And immediately fell into an ecstasy
Which lasted hours on the petunias
In front of the sky while I sat up
In my beachchair amazed he felt
No inhibition before strangers,
But tore his breast open like a window
And stuck his heart out to the sun
And cried and cried and was so happy.

Who bitter who invented facts?
Nothing since has made me even sad.

IF OH YOU WIND

If oh you wind had blown a whisper
Left of where you did,
I would have been a crook, a hero,
Or a winter-colored wit.

But while I flew, the way of leaves,
That simple wind went calm.
I dropped, I broke, my soul fell out,
Now I can do no harm.

Friends, who knows why great men bloom
And we the ninnies blush?
Who knows what wind brought Hannibal,
And what Augustulus?

BOREDOM

A bird shins of up a tree,
The clocks run after time,
The Senate spits a law
against eternal crime,

Fresh factories go wild,
There's so much progress on;
Idleness itself snores louder,
and my lids fall down.

ALWAYS ALMOST

I loved you quaintly at the verge of a kiss.
Poet, the wind blew, was killed in July,
And dropped me in the sun. Nothing is complete.
I have no texts, only dull indices.

God wiped his mouth, nudged his dark Brother,
And said, pointing where Moses sweated:
"Show Moses the suburb of Palestine,
And shoot him at the border."

WHEN IT RAINS

When it rains I am wet
And when the sun shines I am dry;
I am no hero,
When the world hits I cry.

I am my harmony,
Choir of wishes,
But do and die
As the bullet preaches.

TRIPLETS

1.

The world decreed me small,
If the world saw me at all.

2.

Much and long I ran,
Ended, though, where I began.

3.

Dwelling low,
Easy into earth I'll go.



Seven: The poet

POETRY (FOUL MOOD)

What's it for anymore,
and what is it anyway —
a chopping off
of lines anywhere your genius decides?
And what's the point of it I ask you
since you same geniuses robbed it of meter
and shot rhyme, excuse me, rime dead?
Why not grouch and moan
in straight paragraphs
about your unspeakable dads and moms
and your suicides
and your rotten sex-lives
and what happiness it was to live
when the Ice Age was in bloom?
What's wrong with paragraphs?

I give up.
I mean I ought to.
Because I don't know how it happens,
but plop,
and 8 months later,
plop,
a poem (I guess)
comes dripping out
my rotting spout.

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING THE POETS TELL YOU

Did you, my gullibles,
drink the decanter dry
where truth ferments
to savory lie?

Christ barked his orders,

the gospel sings.
Watch for crawlers
who pretend to wings!

SIR TOBY BELCH AGAINST SHAKESPEARE

“Poet, poet, tell me true,
What’s the finest thing a man can do?”

*Sow the verb and noun the earth,
Love the pen, and let the pen give birth.*

“What of ladies and tycoons,
Dogs and tennis, mayors and saloons?”

*A lady is a trochee at her best,
A financier’s an anapest,*

*The dog is half a foot,
And that’s the use to which a dog is put.*

“Farewell, grand master of the jingling craft,
Plato was no fool, who called you daft.

Your he she it what why and who
Get on and never think of you.

And I too swear no words can be
Better than a touchability.

So I’ll choose love and drink and money,
And you can sing hey nonny nonny.”

BU FU DECIDES TO STUDY THE BOOK OF PENTAGRAMS

Love I did, with tooth and tongue,
And sing I did, squalls of crotchets,
Blithe I lazed with tranquil eye,
Autumns flared and winters blazed,
And while their winds dissolved the trees
 I took the hours from a bonbonnière,
 And when the box was empty, found a spare.

But let me face the glorious facts:
Man is solid soul, he strives
To breathe with nostrils of a god,
He longs to task his deathless mind
And vaunt his distance from the beast.
 Besides, the lazy get no bread,
 And man must think in order to be fed.

The birdies fiddle sol mi do mi do.
But have they souls, the birdies? No.

A POET IS RECEIVED AT THE WHITE HOUSE AND APOLOGIZES TO HIS FELLOW POETS

Confession: I'm nothing but a man.
I made a book: Is and Should, Chaos and Plan
Like Vulcan lame with rage
I banged into a shape upon a mighty page.
The Nation was (it happened) looking out
For some inspiring bard to boast about.
A president's assistant sent a note:
The busy chief desired to pin a medal on my coat.
I ran, I grinned, and had my photo snapped.
I spoke some loftitudes, the President looked rapt.
I lunched with senators and journalists.
I beamed each time my rump was kissed.

You laugh, Democritus, you laughing sage;
But ours is not the Periclean age.
And did you not yourself — in Greek — once say,
“When mules are mighty, lions bray”?

TOM FIDDLE IN A HEAVENLY MOOD

I tiptoed on the daybreak of my genius
Saying to my very face, My God,

Tiptoed on the pinpoint of a blade
That spouted on the hill below the air,

One elbow on the sun and bussing
Winds to five incontinents,

Emitting jokes and raving holidays
And dating carnivals on Mondays —

Then do you know? the falcons turned herbivorous
And from a falling bomb mid-air

A chickadee came out and giggled
As it parachuted on a fainting general,

And I employed the idle Angels
And hollered the Dominions to the job

Of shooting roasts of pigeon to the poor
In Panama and Mexico —

Oh that was Sunday of my giant genius
And my name that Sunday was Your High

Serene Magnipotence and never
Sick Tom Fiddle with the wooden leg.

POET'S SECRET

Ah to have been
A Cossack to cringing equations!

To have built
Majestic dams or interplanetary stations.

To have made
The genome bow, unpack and deliver.

To have proved
That Time was never never.

But then, to each of us his lot.
Mine, to fill a vacant slot:

One more scribbler in "the realm of poetry."
Do re mi.

PRAISE-ME-PRAISE-ME!

Praise-me-praise-me! built the Parthenon
And peeled electrons shell by shell;
But who invented *praise-me-praise-me!*
Lucifer or Gabriel?

Grass rhymes selflessly with grass;
Winds, anonymous, mold cumuli.

Call it fair or call it foul:
Where mankind made its bed I lie.

SOME, SCARED OF FAILURE

Some, scared of failure, don't even start,
I call that smart.

Some got loved, envied and hailed,
But wanting more, they think they failed.

Some, happy that they grew one green pea in a pod,
Sigh "Thanks be to God".

Some whose souls the halleluias rot,
Think they themselves are God.

Some whom the toughest saints would bless
Transmute to sweetness their success.

Some hammer at their shame
With blows of "Others are to blame!"

Some, inexhaustible at failing,
Keep up the hearty flailing.

Some hazard a last try,
Then, whispering "So be it", humbly die.

NEITHER GUIBELLINE NOR GUELF

My pen you see roves little in the world,
my syllables are monks. For I perceive
that rhyming warm or cold won't hang a rascal

by the feet nor at the crisis shackle
any barking general. Mine the grief
that trails the earthworm to the hungry bird;
mine the minute dominion of the self:
dominion neither Guibelline nor Guelf.

LE ROI SOLEIL

Le Roi Soleil struck down his man
by looking through his face
as though it were a spot of air
hung in a vacant space.

The world has done with me
entirely the same;
I could not even draw
the compliment of blame.

So into silence and farewell.
I'll never kiss
a word's lips with another rhyme.
The last be this.



Epilogue

IT

Let it die with me.
None need ever know.
Let it be erased.
It is better so.

Notes

The epigraph. “The Organ-Grinder” is the last of the *Winterreise* poems by Wilhelm Müller, the cycle which was set to music by Schubert. Müller’s poem translates roughly as follows: “No one listens to him, no one looks at him, and the dogs growl around the old man, and he lets it all go as it pleases, grinds away, and his hurdy-gurdy is never still.”

Page 5: **An espresso at the “Number Six”.** Vitruvius, the author of *De architectura*, lived in the first century B.C.

Pages 5-7: **The fountain of Trevi.** (a) *Cafone*: a boor, a lout. *Vieni quà subito*: Come over here at once; (b) This poem was written, obviously, in the pre-euro days, and before a glass separation was installed between basin and spectators.

Page 8: **Breakfast and jukebox on Piazza Trasimeno.** The bliss of honeymooners in Rome long before the Soviet Union disintegrated. Piazza Trasimeno is an inconspicuous little square in a residential area of Rome where we had found an affordable hotel.

Pages 8-9: **Cameras.** (a) *Questa, quella*: this, that; (b) I have never been to Peru and Timbuctoo, but the poem doesn’t care.

Pages 12-14: **Morning in Chamonix.** (a) In spite of its name, a *petit crème* is a large cup of coffee and milk; (b) *Trottoir* means sidewalk; (c) The reference to Herrick is owing especially to “The Vine”: “I dreamed this mortal part of mine / Was metamorphosed to a vine, / Which crawling one and every way / Enthralled my dainty Lucia”, etc; (d) I enjoyed a view of several prostitutes of Antwerp plying their profession in a house across the narrow street from my oddly named dockside Hotel Antigone; (e) The Arve flows, I believe, into the Rhône at Geneva.

Pages 14-16: **Colonel Pluchot chats with madame Duchesne.** (a) Rohr is a good pastry-shop in the rue d’Antibes, which runs in elegant parallel to the seaside promenade, the Croisette; (b) The financial scandals concerning the mayor, monsieur Mouillot, took place in 1996, and eventually landed him in jail. In the same year the Rolls-Royces were stolen.

Pages 17-20: **The Tides in Normandy.** (a) Houlgate (pronounced Ool-gatt in French) is an unassuming seaside resort between fashionable Deauville and Proust’s still elegant Cabourg; (b) Eugène-Louis Boudin (1824-1898), who painted his lovely beach scenes in the days when fully dressed ladies and gentlemen sat on the sand in stiff chairs; (c) The two French phrases: “Joining the useful to the pleasant” and “You’re bringing the bread, Jocelyne?”

Pages 20-21: **Dawn at the manor of Cerisy-la-Salle.** Every summer a learned foundation offers a series of conferences on a variety of topics at the manor-house

of Cerisy-la-Salle, in Normandy, near the cathedral town of Coutances. Distinguished scholars lead and speak, paying guests listen, discuss, or idle time away.

Page 21: **One minute before noon.** In its first printed version, I marked this poem “Cerisy-la-Salle, July 27, 1978”. It was begotten by the sight, new for a city-dweller like myself, of two fully grown cows dashing across the meadow that stretches far off from the manor.

Page 22: **The radical visits La Baule.** La Baule, seaside resort in Brittany, where the sight of a wealthy matron at a nearby table inspired this dramatic monologue in the days when Communism was still a longed-for or a dreaded force.

Page 23-24: **The clock in the Amsterdam flea market.** I picked up this clock in 1960 or 1961, the year I lectured on American poetry at the University of Amsterdam, and I must have written a first draft of the poem soon after the little event.

Page 25: **The deserted beach.** Written sometime around the year 1950, this depressive poem is utterly alien to me now, but evidently it arose from a moment of genuine youthful alienation and gloom.

Pages 28-29: **Empty house.** *Bibelots* are decorative knick-knacks.

Pages 34-35: **Song: Today April today.** Like most of the others, this poem has undergone many changes in the course of its life. Of especial interest, however, is the necessary shift from “Eros flies in,/gay as a Greek”, which occurs in its original version, before “gay”, that useful little word, was kidnapped and forcibly conscripted and corrupted under a new banner. Fortunately, however, “gay as a Greek” made no sense to begin with, since Eros *is* Greek!

Page 36: **The twenty-sixth of April.** The inception of the Elizabeth poems (including several in which this person is not named) occurred in the years 1949-1952.

Pages 38-40: **The garden.** Forty and perhaps more than forty years ago, when this poem was composed, one could sing such macho songs without so much as an afterthought.

Pages 41-43: **Unsafe I reply.** An early version of a part of this poem appeared as an epigraph-dedication to my wife in my *Gobble-Up Stories*, published in 1966. It was written between the year I met my future wife at Columbia University in 1955 and the year we were married in New York in 1961. I again used part of it (the last two stanzas) as the epigraph for *Chi Po et le sorcier: conte chinois* (Paris: L’Herne, 2004).

Page 45: **Others are more important.** (a) The thirteenth-century Albigensian heresy of Southern France gave birth to the Inquisition; (b) When the poem appeared in 1960, the fifth line read: "To Europe rationing a rind," proof that it was written close, or fairly close, to the end of World War II. In 1981, I substituted "Asia" for "Europe". But in the year 2005 even "Asia", fortunately, no longer fits (by and large), and I thought it best to generalize the line; (c) The penultimate line reverts to the 1960 reading. In 1981, mistrustful of the presumably archaic inversion of "lies not", I wrote "is not". I now think that the inversion is beautifully permissible.

Page 46: **Brute English.** Decades after composition, I have forgotten the source of the lyric images I quote, but I do vividly recall that they are genuine quotations, and all from a twentieth-century poet, man or woman.

Page 47: **After Goethe.** My homunculus is born of but divergent from Goethe's mannikin in a glass tube, a weird invention of the poet in *Faust* Part II, Act II.

Pages 47-48: **Sullen Myrmidons (1) and (2).** (a) The Myrmidons were brutal Achilles' soldiers; (b) The substitution of a single little word for another makes for two hugely different poems, philosophically speaking.

Page 51: **The great lack of our time....** (a) The quotation which furnishes the title of my poem comes from an essay by Babette Deutsch, but the thought is a commonplace of our times; (b) Atlas' daughters became the constellations Pleiades and Hyades; (c) For the occasion, Osiris is to be pronounced as a dactyl: OZZ-i-ris.

Page 51: **Immortality.** (a) The prolific Diphilus was active in Athens around 300 B.C.; (b) Here again, the name should be pronounced as a dactyl: DIPH-i-lus.

Page 52: **Empedocles.** Legend has it that Empedocles, "Greek philosopher, statesman, poet, religious teacher, and physiologist," threw himself into the crater of Mt. Aetna.

Pages 52-53: **War ditty (1).** These three lyric poets, like Archilochus before them, fled in battle: the first from the Athenians in their war against his native Lesbos in the sixth century B.C., the second at the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C. in which Antony and Octavian defeated and killed Brutus and Cassius, and the third — again in the sixth century B.C. — from Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian empire.

Page 53: **The life and death of Hannibal.** In 183 or 182 B.C., about to be surrendered to the Romans, Hannibal took poison.

Page 53: **To Ovid, from army barracks.** (a) The barracks of the title are those I lived in either at Camp Gordon in Georgia, or at Camp Fuji in Japan (see "Rainy

season in barracks”); (b) Ovid died in exile in the year 18; (c) A levée is a “morning assembly held by a prince or person of distinction”; a parterre is a well-groomed level part of a garden.

Page 54: **The vision of Jesus of Nazareth....** (a) Jesus hears the opening chorus of the *Passion According to St Matthew*; (b) The art inspired by religions (all religions) is perhaps the only type of *unalloyed* good that comes of them.

Page 55: **The atheist.** (a) That famous Roman: Boethius, writing *The Consolation of Philosophy* before dying in prison in the year 524; (b) The Hell of the poem is, of course, Dante’s, Canti XXXII and XXXIII.

Page 55: **A ditty sung by a choir of aging poets....** I had in mind *Oedipus at Colonus*, *The Tempest* and *Faust Part II*. The old don’t like to visit graveyards.

Page 57: **War ditty (2).** (a) This poem is imaginary bravado, since I spent two years in the Army; (b) In the earlier version (called “Ditty on the Brave Man’s Lot”), the last two lines read:

I hate my land, hate mankind more,
And plan to live to ninety-four.

Too strong and a stretch beyond the truth, yet better, I think, as poetry. An interesting dilemma.

Pages 58-60: **Meditation on Wallace Stevens....** (a) Orfèvres: makers and dealers of fine gold, silver and other precious objects, including jewels; (b) El Sereno: a night-watchman in Spain. In the past, he also “boomed” the hours, adding, after the hour, “and all is quiet (sereno)”; (c) The main reason I usually avoid in my poems the worst horrors perpetrated by mankind is a reluctance to make use of them for the pleasures of art.

Page 60: **Do not place your trust in babies.** (a) This poem is effective only if the name in line 2 is immediately familiar. If it fails that test, why not replace it with the name of a two-syllable human monster (trochaic or iambic) who is better known to a particular set or generation of readers? Why not “Nero was one”? (Even the three-syllable Attila might work). I am inventing here the genre of the *open-slot poem*, where the author permits the reader or editor to make a substitution for a given segment of a poem — in this instance, a name — in the interest of updating or clarifying it; (b) With this in mind, why didn’t I use the names of Hitler or Stalin, which will remain far more familiar to the general public than that of the chief of the Gestapo? Something sinister in the sound of the “mm” led me on; perhaps, too, the wish not to be too obvious.

Pages 60-61: **Robinson Jeffers: “Come peace of war....”** The works of the skeptic, agnostic Protagoras, contemporary of Socrates and Pericles, have not survived. Alas.

Pages 61-62: **On the assassination of President Kennedy.** Shortly after the president’s death, I was invited to contribute to an anthology of poems about the assassination. It is the only commissioned poem I have ever written. The “profit”, needless to say, resided entirely in the thought that a few people might be reading the poem, which is not, I might add, lacking in sincerity.

Pages 62-63: **Words for John Strachey’s “On the Prevention of War”.** John Strachey, author, Labour MP, and secretary for war from 1950 to 1951.

Pages 63-64: **How did Sam Beckett die?** By ignoring the biographies, I have made a special point of not finding out the circumstances of Beckett’s last hours.

Page 64: **“Late Frost” by Suzuhiko Kawasaki.** I purchased this painting from the young artist in Tokyo during my military service in 1954.

Page 72: **I am a little snail.** This little poem, almost a nursery rhyme, reveals in few words the foundation of my “view of life”.

Pages 73-74: **Garden idyll.** The little brown bird turned out, on inquiry, to be the brown towhee: *Pipilo crissalis*. This undistinguished family threw out the earlier residents of our garden, a family of jolly, impudent bluejays.

Page 74: **The ostrich.** Written with a wink at an old friend, Dr. Lewis Gass.

Page 77: **Three beasts.** Obviously, this poem flatly contradicts “Insect” — the first lyric in this section. Such is life, such is art.

Page 78: **Impatience.** Impatience about what? If this poem were moved to its other rightful position, namely in the “Roaming Eros” section right after “The Journey”, the answer would be clear.

Page 81: **L’autobus à Paris.** Here is an English equivalent:

Well, well, so I’m one of the elderly,
a “senior citizen”.
It came all of a sudden, no notice given.

I’m lying to myself?

I swear I never saw it coming.
I was looking another way.

A woman, not very old at that,
gives me her seat in the bus.
I must be dreaming! No, it’s me she means!

So what did I do?

I concocted a smile that made me sick,
I sat down, I said thank you.

The bitch!

The *first* such episode took place several years earlier than the scene I describe in the poem; hence the latter is, in a sense, a fictive, nasty recollection of that original dismay.

Page 85: **To Blaise Pascal.** The allusion in the title is to Pascal's notion of *divertissements* — our ways of avoiding the sight of the abyss. The title of an earlier version of the poem was "The Advantage of Trivia".

Page 86: **Esther Lily Sanchez.** (a) Lily Sanchez rose from deepest poverty and deprivation in the Philippines to occupy a fine, responsible position in the administration of the California Institute of Technology. The death of this beautiful young friend and colleague, with whom I enjoyed many a lunch-time and coffee-hour conversation, brought back to my mind the occasion when, "smiling at my graying hair" (for at sixty I looked to her like a decaying if cultured patriarch), she said I must count on her if my wife ever needed help in caring for me; (b) The last line of the poem held true for awhile, but *that* could not last.

Page 89: **Forgive me.** Here is the 1981 version, which named 1977 as the date of composition:

Forgive me, you so pitifully dead,
The dance which young I danced and yet return to dance,
As I forgive — reluctant — in advance —
Swingers on my grave, tumblers in my bed.

Page 95: **Professor Oscar Mandel.** Here is an earlier version of the first twelve lines (the last couplet is unchanged):

:

I cannot build the house where I'm alive.
I do not understand the car I run.
And when I flick my lamp don't ask me how
A turbine wires me respectful light.

I walk in unintelligible shoes
Across a bridge that hangs I don't know why.

I give my TV set a witless stare;
 I turn the knob, my science ends.
 I'm dumb to vinyl, spoons and aspirin.
 How do they make a nail? A submarine?
 What moves the lungs that move my telephone?
 I cannot build the house in which I thrive.

Etc.

Pages 95-96: **Man is what animal?** Upon revisiting this poem, I have my doubts about the perfect truth of some of its propositions, but a measure of truth surely remains.

Page 101: **If oh you wind.** Augustulus, Rome's inglorious last emperor, "an inoffensive youth" (Gibbon).

Page 109: **Bu Fu decides to study the book of pentagrams.** (a) Bu Fu practiced his tricks in my fable *Chi Po and the Sorcerer*; (b) A bonbonnière is a box of sweets.

Pages 109-110: **A poet is received at the White House....** (a) Democritus of Abdera (died around 370 B.C.), the most "modern" and perhaps wisest of all Greek philosophers, but if he ever spoke my last line, the coincidence would be amazing; (b) This poem was originally called "On the bestowing of prizes by an enlightened government" and went as follows:

This is the world, and this the grave ass, man.
 I made a book: Is and Should, Chaos and Plan
 Like Vulcan lame with rage I banged
 Into a shape for gods and you to understand.
 The Nation was (it happened) looking out
 For some great virtuous beast to boast about.
 A busy President got wind, sent me a note
 He wished to hang a medal on my coat.
 I ran, and grinned, and had my photo snapped;
 I spoke; the President looked rapt;
 I lunched with Senators and Journalists;
 I beamed each time my self was kissed.
 But then, Democritus, what can one say?
 When mules are mighty, lions bray.

Page 111: **Poet's secret.** Poetry does not *generate* knowledge, but puts it to music.

Pages 112-113: **Neither Ghibelline nor Guelf.** The supporters, respectively, of papal versus imperial domination in the Middle Ages stand here, of course, for factions since the beginning of human time.

Page 113. **Le Roi Soleil.** (a) Le Roi Soleil is of course the Sun King, that is to say Louis XIV; (b) The last stanza of this poem of long ago is a lie, and not the first one in *Where Is the Light?* But only on the surface.

Index to Titles

- A banker sobbing on his typist 37
A child at the seaside 16
A ditty sung by a choir of aging poets (among them
Sophocles, Shakespeare and Goethe) 55
A fly a fly and I 71
A poet is received at the White House and apologizes to
his fellow poets 109
A visit to the zoo 78
After Goethe 47
After Herrick 38
After Li Po 72
After running five minutes 81
Always almost 102
An espresso at the 'Number Six' (London 1956) 5
Bad choices 65
Bad days for poetry, in five movements 84
Berceuse 90
Boredom 101
Breakfast and jukebox on Piazza Trastevere (Rome
1960) 8
Brute English 46
Bu Fu decides to study the Book of Pentagrams 109
Cameras 8
Camp Gordon (Georgia 1953) 25
Christmas 88
Col du Grand Saint Bernard 12
Colonel Pluchot chats with madame Duchesne 14
Crow 74
Dawn at the manor of Cerisy-la-Salle 20
Dejection 86
Do not place your trust in babies 60
Don't believe everything the poets tell you 107
Dumb to other blood 37
Easter Sunday 99
Empedocles 52
Empty house 28
Esther Lily Sanchez (1944-1988) 86
Falling 33
Fever 33

Forgive me 89
 Foul mood 45
 Four hands whisper and do 36
 From Chihuahua to the border 24
 Garden idyll 73
 Genius (Lucerne) 11
 Holy books 54
 Homeric simile 76
 How did Sam Beckett die? 63
 I am a little snail 72
 Iago 56
 If oh you wind 101
 Immortality 51
 Impatience 78
 In a democracy 27
 Insect 71
 It 115
 L'autobus à Paris (le 25 juin 2004) 81
 "Late Frost" by Suzuhiko Kawasaki 64
 Le Roi Soleil 113
 Let us dream (1) 29
 Let us dream (2) 29
 Lover's maxim 41
 Man is what animal? 95
 Marching song 88
 Me for soft floors 85
 Meditation on Wallace Stevens' "The imperfect is our paradise" 58
 Memorial Day 90
 Miracle play 88
 Morning at Chiavari (Liguria) 11
 Morning in Chamonix 12
 Motion 71
 My father: 1978 91
 Neither Guibelline nor Guelf 112
 No more poems (1) 40
 No more poems (2) 40
 Old man in love 83
 On my 29th birthday 99
 On re-reading the New Testament 54
 On the assassination of President Kennedy 61

On the beach 17
 One minute before noon 21
 One of the astronauts ate a piece of consecrated bread
 on the moon (1969) 29
 Open letter to God 82
 Others are more important 45
 Pigeon fly 75
 Plenitude 33
 Poet's secret 111
 Poetry (foul mood) 107
 Praise-me-praise-me! 111
 Professor Oscar Mandel 95
 Rainy season in barracks (Camp Fuji 1954) 27
 Repine, repine 44
 Robbers 9
 Robert Frost: "I'd as soon make love in Lover's Lane as write for
 Little Magazines" 58
 Robinson Jeffers: "Come peace or war, the progress of Europe and
 America becomes a long process of deterioration" 60
 Sir Toby Belch against Shakespeare 108
 Slanted bird 75
 Some, scared of failure 112
 Song: Today April today 34
 Sullen Myrmidons (1) 47
 Sullen Myrmidons (2) 47
 Tell me, where is the light? 1
 The atheist 55
 The clock in the Amsterdam flea market 22
 The conceptions of the intellect 57
 The deserted beach 24
 The dullard in the shipping department 98
 The ecstasy of Brother Giles 100
 The egg the Mother threw 45
 The Fountain of Trevi 5
 The garden 38
 The great lack of our time is that we have no commanding myth to which
 we can give allegiance"...51
 The jail 41
 The journey 41
 The life and death of Hannibal 53

The lodger in the floating room 96
 The ostrich 74
 The proofreader's lament 97
 The radical visits La Baule 21
 The romantic materialist 40
 The schoolyard 82
 The soldier and Baudelaire 56
 The swimmer with the long cigar 96
 The tides in Normandy (Houlgate) 17
 The tree 87
 The twenty-sixth of April 36
 The vision of Jesus of Nazareth concerning Johann Sebastian Bach 54
 The young man who is blind 66
 Three beasts 77
 Thwarted lover 43
 To Blaise Pascal 85
 To Ovid, from army barracks 53
 Tom Fiddle in a heavenly mood 110
 Triplets 102
 Two views 11
 Unsafe I reply 41
 War ditty (1) 52
 War ditty (2) 57
 When does why end? 76
 When it rains 102
 Words for John Strachey's "On the Prevention of War" 62
 Wounded philosopher 44
 Young Pan hauls Methodists away 34

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